

Castle on the Hill by JoMo3

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Summary:

It's 1990 in Hawkins, Indiana. The Party has gone off to college. But during one weekend at the end of summer, they find themselves back home for Jonathan and Nancy's wedding.

Mike and Eleven have been broken up for almost a year; but will seeing her again bring up old emotions?

A story about growing up, growing apart, and growing together.

1. Wheeler & Friends

Author's Note:

I titled this "Castle on the Hill" after the Ed Sheeran song because it makes me think about going home again, and that's a lot of what's going on in this story. Hope you enjoy.

January 4, 1985

"Pretty."

Mike and El lay next to each other on the floor, gazing at the ceiling. As a sort of "coming back" gift, the boys had decorated her ceiling with glow-in-the-dark stars, and Mike and El were currently enjoying the view.

What had started out as a party of six was now just a party of two, as the other members of their group-Will, Lucas, Max, and Dustin-had gone home an hour ago. The ever-special Mike was allowed to spend the night at the cabin.

It had taken a lot of begging and pleading from Eleven for Hopper to go along with it, as (a) he still wanted to keep things low key with her, and (b) he wasn't too thrilled about El sleeping in close proximity to Mike Wheeler, whose very presence reminded him that he was a surrogate father to a growing, hormonal, teenage girl.

But they had worked out a compromise; that Mike would sleep in the main room of the cabin, with Eleven sleeping in her room. And once Hopper went to bed, they were to remain in separate rooms, her door shut.

"Ten more minutes!" Hopper called from the other room.

"Okay!" El called back. Her hand finding Mike's, she let out a sigh.

"When it gets warmer outside, I'll take you out and show you the constellations," Mike said.

“Constellations?”

“Yeah. They’re, like, pictures in the sky. They’re cool.”

“Cool,” she repeated.

“They’re sometimes hard to see,” Mike explained, “Unless you have a telescope. I’ve been wanting one for forever, but I can never seem to save up enough money.”

“Did you ask for Christmas?”

Shaking his head, Mike said, “I did, but I didn’t get one.”

“Maybe next year?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Eleven let out a yawn, and, turning, rested her head on Mike’s shoulder. Mike let out a sigh of content. He could stay like this for the rest of his life.

August 10, 1990

It was a long drive from the Indianapolis International Airport into Hawkins, but the two boys were making good time. Mike’s flight had landed nearly an hour ago and, after getting his luggage, had navigated his way to passenger pickup to find his ride, Will Byers, waiting for him. Now, the two were headed home.

Home.

Mike had been in Hawkins a few months ago to celebrate his father (finally) retiring, but here he was again, albeit for a different reason:

Nancy and Jonathan were getting married.

The two had been on again/off again for the past few years, finally deciding to cut it out and marry one another. All of the boys were

flying in for the weekend:

Mike, who lived in Boston and attended MIT.

Lucas, who was in school at Stanford, way out in California.

Dustin, studying for his PhD at the University of Michigan.

Will, who'd been renting a place with Jonathan in New York while he attended art school.

And then, of course, there was El.

Jane "Eleven" Hopper still lived in Hawkins. When Mike had been here for his father's retirement, he had been in and out of town so quickly that he hadn't gotten a chance to see her. Now he was nervous for the inevitable meeting between the two. Each time he'd seen her since they'd broken up was different. About 75% of the time they were fine with each other, joking and acting like they did, back in the day.

But that other 25%....

It'd been difficult at first, trying to be friends. But he and El had such a strong bond that he felt he *had* to have her in his life, in one form or another. It had been a strange transition, and to be honest, the first few times they'd spoken after the breakup had been a bit harsh. He'd been so mad at her about it.

They say time heals all wounds, but it doesn't, at least not for Mike. The wound just got covered for a brief period of time, and days like today opened it back up again.

He wasn't mad anymore. But he didn't know how he felt, either. A small part of him didn't want to talk to her anymore. A bigger part of him wanted them to just be friends, like they were years ago.

And still another part of him that he tried to deny, wanted her back.

"Earth to Mike," Will said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"What?"

"I asked you if you want to stop by the rental place, and see if your tux fits."

"Yeah, I heard you," Mike said, lying. "Uh, no. I'll just go tomorrow."

Both he and Will were in the wedding-Will as the best man, Mike as a groomsman. Of course, El was, too; as a bridesmaid.

They pulled onto Maple Street, and Mike smiled as he saw the familiar surroundings of his childhood.

Nodding towards Lucas's house, Will said "He's out with his parents. You said five, right?"

"Right," Mike said, nodding. The group was going to meet at their old hangout spot-the Wheeler basement-and go get something to eat later. "Holly's got a thing," Mike continued as his house came into view. "A soccer game she wants me to come watch tonight."

Will nodded, as he drove into the driveway at the end of the cul-de-sac. Putting the car in park, he turned to Mike. "I, um...I invited El tonight."

"You what?" Mike asked, eyes widening.

"I'm sorry," Will said, fidgeting with his hands. "She was over at my mom's yesterday, and we started talking about the wedding, and she asked about you and.."

"She asked about me?"

"Well, yeah, just...when were you coming in and stuff. But I told her about how we were all going to get dinner, and I asked if she wanted to come, too."

"Ugghh," Mike moaned, putting his head onto the headrest.

"I thought you guys were good now. It's been a year, hasn't it?"

It *had* been a year since they'd broken up. But still, Mike hadn't planned on seeing her tonight.

"I can call her, ask her not to come," Will offered.

"No," Mike responded, shaking his head. "It'll be okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Mike said, nodding and sitting up. "It'll be fine." Unbuckling his seat belt, he thanked Will for the ride as he got out of the car.

"Yeah, no problem," Will said as Mike got his luggage from the trunk. "See you in a few hours."

Mike nodded as he closed the back door, suitcase in hand. He waved goodbye to Will as the car backed into the street. Once the car was turned away, he muttered "*Dammit*" under his breath.

He made his way to the front door, and knocked. "Coming," he heard a familiar voice call from the other side of the door. A moment later it opened, and he was looking back at his mother. "Mike!" she said, smiling widely.

"Hey, mom," he responded, stooping a little to hug her.

"I thought you were going out with your friends first," she said, making way for him to come inside.

"No, not till later." Stepping in, he looked around the room and it's familiar decorum. "Where is everyone?"

"Your father's at the store. Nancy's out with Catrina..."

"Who?"

"Her maid of honor. And Holly's upstairs somewhere."

"Oh."

"How was your flight?"

"It was fine. I slept most of the way."

"When do you fly back?"

"Tuesday," he answered. The wedding was on Sunday. "Let me take this upstairs, and I'll be back down in a minute," he told her, nodding at his suitcase. He climbed the steps up to the second floor. Passing the door of Nancy's room, he made his way to his door, and opened it. A thousand memories always washed over him when he visited his childhood room.

The sleepovers he'd had with his friends in elementary school, the times spent at his desk writing campaigns, and of course what he liked to refer to as his "11 Memories."

True, that week she'd first come to the Wheeler home had mostly been spent in the basement, but his room had a few memories as well. The closet, where he'd asked her to hide when his mom came home with Holly; his toy table, where he'd shown her Yoda and Roary. It now sat pushed against the wall, dusty and still.

Sitting on a shelf were a few photo frames of he and his friends. He had some at his apartment in Boston, but he'd also left a lot here:

The science fair win.

A photo of the boys, when Will had returned home from the hospital.

The group at the Snowball.

A picture of El, grinning at the camera, showing off the glow-in-the-dark stars that decorated the ceiling in her room.

A photo of he and El at the cabin.

He picked that one up, and looked at it. In it, the two were probably around 15. Mike remembered the day it was taken-the Fourth of July, because it was taken right before Hopper lit the fireworks. Will had borrowed Jonathan's camera that day and was snapping pictures of everyone, and happened to catch Mike and El in a moment. In the photo, the two sat next to each other on the porch, hand in hand as they smiled at the camera.

Mike groaned, reliving the memory. Yes he had known he was going to see her this weekend, but he hadn't planned on it being tonight. Will was right; it'd been a year, and the last time he'd seen her

(February) things had been friendly between the two of them. But now he was second guessing everything. Should he cancel? Should he...

“Mike!”

He jumped, startled, at the voice coming from the doorway. Turning, he saw his little sister, 10 year-old Holly, coming into the room. They met with a hug, then she pulled away. “You’re still coming to my game tonight, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Mike said.

“Cool.” She saw the picture frame in his hand. “It’s not gonna be all weird between you two at the wedding, is it?”

“No,” Mike said, shaking his head. “I’ll behave.”

“Good. Because I really like El.” When Nancy had gone off to college, Holly had unofficially adopted El as her big sister, something that had continued even after he and Eleven had broken up.

“What about me?” Mike asked, feigning being hurt.

“I like you too,” she said. “But I like El better,” she added, sticking her tongue out and darting out of the room.

Mike grinned, shaking his head. “I don’t blame you,” he muttered under his breath.

The next hour was spent with Mike, his mother, and Holly down at the kitchen table, catching up and talking about the wedding. When Ted Wheeler returned from the store, he joined them at the table as their discussion continued. Around 4, Holly had to go and get ready for her event, and the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of Mike’s friends.

Well *friend* , it turned out, as Dustin was the sole person on the other side of the door when Mike opened it.

“Wheeler!” the curly boy exclaimed, wrapping Mike in a bear hug that lifted him off the ground.

“Jeez, Dustin,” Mike said as he was lowered down. “You act like it’s been years.”

“It *has* ,” Dustin said, coming inside. Running a hand through his curly hair, he said, “The last time I saw you, you were *this* big,” he said, holding his hand a few feet from the ground.

“Idiot,” Mike said. “Come on, let’s go downstairs.”

The two friends went down into the basement. It hadn’t changed much, save a few boxes of Mike and Nancy’s things that were moved from their bedrooms to the basement. The couch, the game table, the board games were all there.

“So when’d you get in?” Mike asked as the two sat at the table.

“Last night,” Dustin answered. “I pretty much slept all day. Have you seen any of the Party?”

“Will,” Mike answered. “He was my ride from the airport. When do you go back?”

“Wednesday.” Shaking his head and smiling, Dustin said, “This has gotta be weird for you, huh?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “We’re still friends, Dustin. Just because we broke up doesn’t mean we can’t be, like...civil towards each other.”

Dustin frowned. “Uh, I was talking about your sister marrying Will’s brother. But now that you mentioned Eleven...”

“No,” Mike said, putting his hands up.

“Come on, you’re the one that brought it up!”

“Only because I didn’t know what you were talking about!”

The basement door opened, and there was the sound of hurried feet coming down the stairs. Mike tensed as he saw the shoes, fearing it

would be El. He then relaxed when he saw it was Lucas and Will.

“Mike,” Lucas said, as Mike stood up and gave him a hug.

The group exchanged greetings before they all ended up sitting around the table.

“Just like old times, huh?” Will asked.

“Yeah, now all we need is a campaign,” Lucas said. “Actually...”

Mike smiled. “I’m working on it.”

“Yes!” the boys cheered.

The last time they had all been together was Christmas, and they hadn’t gotten a chance to play D & D. But Mike had been planning a wedding-themed campaign over the past two weeks. “Maybe tomorrow night?” Mike asked.

“Tomorrow’s the bachelor party, isn’t it?” Lucas asked, looking at Will.

Will nodded. “Yeah. But Jonathan doesn’t want anything big. We were just gonna go to a bar.”

“Aw, no strippers?” Dustin whined.

“No, Dustin,” Will said.

“Well, then maybe after the party or something,” Mike said.

“I still can’t believe they’re finally doing it,” Lucas said about Nancy and Jonathan. Looking at Will, he asked, “Is Jonathan freaking out?”

“No,” Will responded, shaking his head. “He’s actually pretty calm about it. I think he knew it was just a matter of time.”

“They’ve been on and off so much that it had to happen eventually,” Dustin said.

“Speaking of on and off,” Lucas said, turning to Mike with a smile.

“Jesus, you, too?” Mike asked.

“I just want to know if thing are gonna be, like, weird at dinner,” Lucas said, holding up his hands.

“Wait, what?” asked Dustin.

“El’s coming,” Will said.

“She is ?” Dustin said, grinning from ear to ear. “This is gonna be *awe* some.”

“Seriously, you guys suck,” Mike said.

Will shrugged. “I thought the whole party was gonna come.”

“Where’s Max?” Mike asked.

Lucas and Max had their own on/off relationship going on. They’d both moved out to California after high school; Lucas to start at Stanford and Max to be back home. The other boys still didn’t know what was going on with the two of them, just that they kept in touch.

“She’s coming,” Lucas said. “But not until tomorrow night.”

“Just in time for the bachelorette party,” Dustin said.

Lucas nodded.

They heard the door leading upstairs open, and Mike heard a soft but familiar voice call, “Hello?”

The boys turned to Mike, grinning. “Down here, El,” Will called.

Mike braced himself as he saw a pair of white Converse sneakers come down the stairs slowly. The other boys stood up, but Mike sat, watching as Eleven Hopper slowly came into view. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Dustin was the first to greet her, giving her a hug. Lucas came in next, and as they hugged, El and Mike’s eyes met for a brief second before he looked away.

“Max’ll be here tomorrow,” Lucas told her as they let go of one

another.

"I know, she called me," El said. She turned to her friend at the game table, who was slowly standing up. "Hey, Mike."

"Hey, El," he said, coming from behind the table.

"Is this weird? It feels weird," Lucas said.

"Shut up, Lucas," Mike said.

El smiled as she made her way to Mike, and the two hugged. "It's good to see you," she said into his shoulder.

As he held her, a thousand memories and emotions came back to Mike. The way she fit in his arms like a puzzle piece, the way her head rested beneath his chin. The smell of her strawberry shampoo. It reminded him of summer days, the two of them laying on a blanket at the quarry, all of the countless hugs and hand holding they'd done over the years.

They slowly released one another, and looked into each other's eyes. "Good to see you, too," he said.

She smiled shyly back.

"So where're we gonna go?" Dustin asked, snapping Mike out of his daze. "I'm starving."

They rode in Lucas's car; Dustin, El, and Will squeezed into the backseat. After spending the car ride debating where to eat, the group settled on a chain restaurant that'd recently set up shop in Hawkins.

Once inside, the hostess (who Lucas *swore* they'd gone to school with) led them to a booth near a window. Lucas squeezed in on one side, with Will following him and Eleven at the end. Mike sat across from Lucas, with Dustin next to him.

"So what're we doing after this?" Dustin asked. "You guys want to

see a movie? I still haven't seen *Die Hard 2* yet."

"Did you guys see *Arachnophobia*?" Lucas asked.

"I did, it was lame," Mike said.

"I kind of want to see *Flatliners*, it opens today," Will said.

"Ooh, isn't that girl from *Pretty Woman* in that?" Dustin said, grinning. "I'd see that just for her."

"I liked *Pretty Woman*," El said quietly. "It was cute."

"It was the definition of a chick flick," Lucas said.

"It wasn't too bad," Will added.

Lucas made a gagging sound, causing the table to laugh. He started to say something else when his napkin suddenly blew into his face. As their waitress came to the table, Lucas shot a glare at El, who was hiding a smile as she wiped at her nose.

The group barely stifled their giggles as they ordered their drinks. When she left, Lucas looked at El and whispered, "No fair."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, opening the menu with a smile.

Mike smiled.

"So, *Flatliners*?" Dustin asked.

"Sure, I'm up for it," Will said.

"Me too, as long as there isn't more flying napkins," Lucas muttered.

"El? What about you?" Will asked.

Shaking her head, she responded "I can't, I told Holly I'd go to her game tonight."

Mike paused. "You're going to that?"

El looked up. "Yeah."

"Me too."

"Wow, what a *coincidence* ," Dustin said in a teasing voice. "Hey, here's an idea...Mike, why don't you ride with El to the game, huh?"

Mike shot Dustin a look, but when he turned back to El, she was shrugging her shoulders. "I'm okay with that," she said. Then, looking at Mike, she added, "If you are."

"Yeah, sure, I mean...yeah," Mike said, fumbling over his words.

He stole a glance at Will, who snickered before looking down at his menu.

Letting out a groan, Mike decided to let the cat out of the bag. "El, will you tell them that it isn't weird between us anymore? They've been hounding me since I got back about this."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "It's not weird."

"See? Can you guys just let it go?," Mike asked.

The boys mumbled "okay."

They talked about what they might get for a few minutes before they heard a familiar voice say "If it isn't you little shitheads."

They looked up, almost in unison, to see Steve Harrington making his way from the bar.

"Steve!" Dustin said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm surprised they let you little runts in here," Steve said, as the group got up to greet him. Once the hugging and handshakes were finished, everyone sat back down, with Steve sitting on the end next to Dustin.

"What're you doing here?" Mike asked.

"Uh, getting a drink, what do you think I'm doing here?" Steve

replied. "Me and some of my friends come here sometimes after work. You guys all here for the wedding?"

The group nodded their heads, unsure of Steve's feelings about it.

Sensing their semi-discomfort, Steve said "Hey, I'm fine with it. Good for them. Believe it or not, they sent me an invitation."

Will looked surprised. "They did? Jonathan didn't tell me."

"Well, it was a last minute thing. I ran into Jonathan when he was in town a few months back, and he told me about it." Steve shrugged. "No big deal." He scanned the table. "Hey, where's that little redhead with the bad driving skills?"

"She's flying in tomorrow," El said.

"Hm. How long you guys in town for?"

They all answered, and in the middle of it their waitress returned to take their orders. Glancing at Steve, she asked, "Will you be joining them?"

"No," he answered, standing up. "Just saying hi. I'll see you guys around, alright?"

They all said goodbye, then placed their orders as he went back to his friends. Once their waitress left, Will said, "Well, he hasn't changed."

"Still has that awesome hair," Dustin said.

"What's he up to, you know?" Mike asked.

"He works in construction," Will said. "Hopper told me."

"He has a daughter," El added.

Everyone turned to her. " *He does ?* "

She nodded. "Her name's Daisy."

"Is he married?" Dustin asked.

“Dustin, you of all people, should know,” Lucas said. “Wasn’t he, like, your other mom or something?”

“We kind of lost touch when I moved,” Dustin said sadly.

“I don’t know if he’s married or not,” El responded.

“Wow. Steve has a kid,” Mike mumbled to himself.

“Do you think he’s gonna object at the wedding?” Lucas asked.

“Uh, if he’s married, I doubt it,” Dustin said.

“We don’t even know if he is,” Will said.

“How old is his daughter?” Mike asked Eleven.

She shrugged, then said “She’s only about a year old. He brought her to the store once. She’s cute.”

Mike smiled, imagining a little female version of Steve in diapers, sitting in a highchair. “Good for him.”

After dinner, the boys dropped El and Mike at the Wheeler’s, so the two could get El’s car and drive to the game. Lucky for Mike, the boys didn’t make fun of the (definitely) awkward drive ahead of them.

Thankfully the soccer field where the game would be played wasn’t too far from Mike’s parent’s home.

“So how’ve you been?” El asked as she backed out of the driveway.

“What?”

“We didn’t get to really talk. How’re things going?”

“Oh. Uh, they’re fine, I guess. How’re...uh, how’re things going with you? How’s it going at the store?”

For the past few years, El had been employed at Melvald’s, the same

place of employment as Joyce Byers.

"It's alright, I guess," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Same old, same old. I'm actually thinking about taking some classes at the community college."

"Really? What about..." He hesitated finishing that sentence. The end of that question was part of the reason they'd broken up.

"What about what?" she asked as she stopped at a light. She turned her eyes to him, and Mike felt his heartbeat pick up. Memories of gazing into her eyes came rushing back to him, and he looked away, outside, to avoid that surge of feelings.

"What about Hopper?" he asked, going away from the *real* question.

"I haven't told him," she said, as the light turned green and she moved forward. "Not yet, at least."

"Oh."

Minutes later they arrived at the soccer field, and Mike saw his parent's station wagon in the parking lot as El parked her small sedan in an empty space. El led the way to the bleachers. Once there, she climbed to the top, and he followed. When they sat, Mike spotted his parents a few rows down.

"Do you want to go sit with them?" El asked.

Part of him did, to avoid any awkwardness with El. But for some reason, he shook his head, saying "No, I'll see them after the game."

The two teams were stretching, and Mike didn't see Holly at first. El tapped his shoulder while he was scanning the players. "She's there," she said, pointing to the girl in the red #8 jersey.

"Holly!" Mike called down. She didn't hear him, so he said it again, louder, "Holly!"

His sister turned and waved, but the people in front of Mike and El turned as well, giving Mike a look for shouting.

“Sorry,” he muttered. El stifled a giggle.

“She almost wore number eleven,” El said. “I asked her not to.”

Mike grinned.

The game began, and the two watched silently for a while, albeit with a few comments about the game. When the opposing team called a timeout, Mike decided to pick up the conversation.

“How long have you been coming to her games?” he asked El.

Rubbing her arm, she said, “I come to all of them. Unless I’m working.”

“How does she usually do?”

“Holly? She’s good, she’s made a couple of goals.”

Mike nodded. “You know, earlier she said she likes you better than me.”

“Well, she is smart,” El said, grinning. Mike grinned as well, as they both let out a chuckle.

The game resumed, and when it got to halftime, Mike decided to go and say hi to his parents. When he finished talking, he joined El back at the top of the bleachers. They sat in a semi-comfortable silence before Mike decided to ask what he’d started to earlier. “So...how’s your mom doing?”

She turned to him, a somewhat surprised look on her face, before she answered. “Uh...she’s...doing the same, I guess. Becky is talking about putting her into a...hospice.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, El.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. I’m kind of glad. She’s going to get some good help, I guess.”

He frowned, wishing he hadn’t brought this up. Part of him wanted to take her hand, and tell her things were going to be alright. But he

stopped himself, thinking *what is wrong with you?*

Instead, he said “Well that’s good, right?”

She nodded.

“How’s Hopper been?”

“The same,” she answered, grinning. “Works too much and complains about it.” Turning to him, she asked, “How’re things in Boston?”

“It’s good. I like being on my own, but there are days where I...I miss everyone, you know?”

“Yeah,” she answered, nodding. “I know the feeling.”

He felt the frown come back to his face, thinking *of course she feels like that. Everyone else-The Party-left* . But then his frown disappeared, as he remembered it’d been *her* choice to stay, and if she felt lonely then it was all her...

He stopped himself, shaking those thoughts away. They were in a good place now, no need to go mucking it up. “Have you thought about....going somewhere else?”

She shrugged, and looked at him. “Where would I go?”

The way she was looking at him, she almost looked as if she were teasing him. *But that can’t be right* , he thought to himself. *It’s almost like she’s flirting with...*

“Goal, Holly Wheeler,” the announcer said.

El and Mike turned back to the field, and saw Holly’s teammates surrounding her as they celebrated.

“Yeah, Holly!” Mike called, standing up and clapping. Holly saw him and waved.

He sat down when the game resumed. He and El watched quietly for a few minutes.

“So, the wedding...” El began.

“Yeah, how have we not talked about that yet?” Mike asked.

“Have you seen Nancy yet?”

“No, she wasn’t there when I got in.”

“Joyce is so excited,” El said with a smile. “It’s all she’s been talking about the last couple of weeks. Donald’s been complaining behind her back.”

“You got your dress and everything?” When she nodded, he asked, “What’re you guys doing for the bachelorette party?”

“Honestly, I don’t know yet. The maid of honor’s running it.” She smiled nervously at him. “I’ve never been to one, have you?”

“A bachelorette party? No, never.”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “Mouth breather, you know what I mean.”

Grinning, he answered “No, I haven’t been to one of these things before. I think for Jonathan’s we’re just going to a bar or something.”

El nodded.

When the game ended, the two of them went down and congratulated Holly on her goal and her team winning, 4 to 2.

Mike decided to get a ride home with his family, so El told everyone goodbye.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” he offered to El, who nodded her acceptance.

When they reached the parking lot, El asked, “Do you remember you wanted a telescope, a long time ago?”

Mike nodded. “I’m surprised you remember that.”

“Did you ever get one?”

“No,” he said. “Why?”

“I was up at the cabin a week ago, to get some stuff out of storage, and the stars are still up there. Made me think of that.”

Mike smiled, remembering. “Maybe next Christmas.”

She chuckled. “Maybe.” They arrived at her car.

“Well, it was good seeing you, El,” he told her.

“You too.”

“We have the rehearsal dinner tomorrow, right?”

“Right.”

“So, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

She nodded, and for a moment Mike felt inclined to hug her. But instead he just said goodbye again, as she got into her car and he went to meet his parents.

When he got back to his parents’ house, his mom stopped him before he went upstairs.

“I almost forgot,” she told him. “When your friends came over earlier, El brought you something.”

He raised an eyebrow. “She did? What is it?”

“It’s in the living room.”

He walked to the living room, wondering why she hadn’t said anything, and saw a wrapped box standing against the wall. Picking it up, he noticed the small card attached that read *Maybe next year* .

He felt a smile come to his face as he unwrapped the present.

"What is it?" his mom asked, coming to the doorway.

Mike chuckled. "It's a telescope."

"Mike..."

He stirred awake at hearing her voice. When he opened his eyes, she was there, kneeling next to him on the floor.

"El?" he whispered, sitting up. "What's wrong?"

His eyes finally adjusting to the dark, he could see the tear streaks on her cheeks.

"Bad dream," she whispered.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Can I...sleep here?"

"Oh. Uh..." he sat up, not knowing what to say. He would love to have her sleep here with him, but was too terrified of what Hopper would say should he see them sleeping next to one another.

"I, uh, I don't know, El..."

"Please?" she whispered.

Against all his better judgement, he nodded his head, and took off the blanket he had on top of his sleeping bag, and tossed it over her as she lay next to him on the floor. He looked around for something she could use as a pillow; not finding anything suitable, he grabbed a cushion from the end of the couch as he handed her his own pillow, with him using the cushion.

Satisfied, he climbed back into his sleeping bag as Eleven curled into a ball, facing him as she closed her eyes.

"Thank you, Mike," she whispered, sounding tired.

"You're welcome, El," he whispered back.

He watched her eyes close with sleepiness. Screw what Hopper thought, he thought to himself. She was worth it.

2. Party People

October, 1985

“It’s just a party, Mike.”

Mike and Will sat in Mike’s basement; Mike worked on homework while Will, already finished with his, sketched on the floor.

They’d been talking about possible activities to do during the upcoming weekend and Will, who was kinda sorta dating Jennifer Hayes, had mentioned a party she was throwing.

“Besides, I don’t want to go by myself,” Will said.

“What about Lucas, and Dustin? Or even Max?”

Shaking his head, Will answered “Max is going out of town this weekend. Dustin said he’d come, but only if you came. I don’t know if Lucas will go without Max. That just leaves you and Eleven.”

Mike sighed. Eleven had started going to school with them back in September. He didn’t want to go because (1) he didn’t want to be around people he didn’t know and (2) part of him feared El would see another boy there she liked more than Mike.

“I don’t know, Will,” he muttered.

“I think El would like it,” Will said as he reached for a green colored pencil. “It’d give her a chance to maybe meet some new people.”

That’s what I’m afraid of, Mike thought. “Why does she have to meet new people?” Mike asked, a little stubbornly.

As if sensing what he was thinking, Will looked up with a grin. “She’s not going to leave you, Mike.”

“Huh?” Mike asked, looking up.

"You're afraid she's going to leave you, aren't you?"

Mike felt color come to his cheeks as he looked back down at his homework. "I don't know."

Looking back at his picture, Will said "Mike, she thinks you're the moon and the stars. She's not gonna leave you for some wastoid at Jennifer Hayes' party. She loves you too much."

At that, Mike looked up. "You...you think she loves me?"

Will scoffed. "Uh, yeah. It's pretty obvious to everyone that you two love each other."

Mike grinned to himself. He and El hadn't said that word to each other, but Mike had been thinking about telling her the last couple of months. Honestly, since she came back.

"Besides," Will said, trading the green for a purple, "Don't you think El should experience her very first party?"

Huffing, Mike nodded his head. "Okay. I'll go."

Will smiled. "Thanks."

August 11, 1990

Mike woke up to the sound and smell of something he'd dearly missed since he moved to Massachusetts: the smell and sounds of his mother cooking breakfast. Yawning, he turned and glanced at the bedside clock; it was just a little past ten on Saturday morning.

Sitting up, he ran through everything he had to do today: tux fitting, the rehearsal dinner, and the bachelor party.

As he got out of bed he saw the telescope he'd received last night from El. He still couldn't believe she'd remembered that. Was she trying to tell him something by giving it to him? Or was it just a

friendly gesture, a peace offering?

Walking to the shelf with the pictures, he picked up the photo of a teenaged El, smiling with the star stickers decorating the ceiling. He remembered he and the boys had spent almost an hour getting the damn things up there, after finding a ladder in the cabin. Hopper hadn't been home, and while the boys put up the stars, Max had introduced her to music she'd deemed cool.

Putting the photo back on the shelf, Mike went downstairs. His mother's back was to him, his father was nowhere to be seen, and Holly sat in the next room, watching Saturday morning cartoons.

Karen Wheeler looked up from the stove, and smiled when she saw her son. "Good morning."

"Morning. Breakfast ready?"

"Pretty soon," she said, moving the eggs around.

"Where's dad?"

"Still sleeping," she answered. "So is Nancy. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine," he said.

"So..." Karen paused, turning from the stove. "Why did El get you a telescope?"

"It's just a...a joke between the two of us."

"Hm. Well, you can go join Holly if you want, I'll let you know when breakfast is ready."

Mike nodded, going into the next room where Holly was watching *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Mike smiled as he sat next to her on the couch. "You watch this too?"

She gave him a look. "You still watch cartoons?"

"I'm a nerd, remember?" he asked, ruffling her hair. "Who's your favorite?"

“Michelangelo, hands down,” she said.

“Aww, his name’s Mike and my name’s Mike,” he said, teasing. “I must be your favorite, then.”

She tossed a pillow at him. “Who’s your favorite?”

“Raphael.”

“He’s a jerk,” she said, shaking her head.

Mike nodded. “Good game, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“How often do you score?”

She shrugged. “Not a whole bunch. I think that was my third goal this year? We only have two games left.”

Breakfast was ready soon after, and the two youngest Wheelers made their way into the kitchen. Their mother called up to her husband and Nancy as Mike and Holly made their plates.

Ted Wheeler came down just as Mike had finished piling on eggs, bacon, and waffles. “Good morning,” he told everyone.

“Morning,” they said back.

Once he sat, Mike scanned the table for something.

“Syrup?” Holly asked.

Smiling, Mike nodded.

Holly handed it to him as she sat across from him. As Mike poured some on his waffles and then on his eggs, he heard “Ew, Mike. You still do that?”

He turned, and saw his big sister and the bride to be, Nancy, enter the room.

“Hey,” he said, smiling. “I can put some on yours, if you’d like.”

“Uh, no,” she said. Holding out her arms, she said, “Come here.”

He got up and gave her a quick hug. They weren’t hug-centric siblings, so it was a bit of a surprise to him.

“Thanks for coming,” she said to him as they pulled apart.

“Of course. Wouldn’t miss it,” he said as he sat back down. “Are you freaking out?”

“No, not really,” she said, fixing her plate. “You’re coming to the rehearsal tonight, right?”

“Yeah,” he answered, mouth full of egg.

“And you’ve already got your tux?”

“Um...”

She spun around. “*Um* ? Mike, the wedding’s tomorrow, and you don’t have your tux yet?”

“I just got in yesterday,” he said. “And besides, Will’s coming to pick me up at noon to go get it taken care of.”

She turned back around, shaking her head. “Even dad’s got his already.”

“Yep,” Ted murmured, looking at the paper.

“Nancy, sit down,” Karen said. “It’s been a while since we all sat and ate together. We may not get the chance again, with you becoming Nancy Byers and all.”

Nancy rolled her eyes as she sat, very little on her plate. “I’m getting married, mom, not moving to Europe. We’ll still have family dinners.”

“That’s all you’re eating?” Mike asked, looking at the one bacon strip and scarce amount of eggs.

“I’ve got a dress to fit in,” Nancy said, nibbling at the bacon.

"I call her waffle!" Holly said, getting up and going to get it.

Around 12:15 Will arrived, and he and Mike made the drive downtown so Mike could pick up his tux. Will already had his.

The shop they needed to go to was down the street from The Palace, and both Mike and Will decided they'd go if they had time.

"The rehearsal's at six," Will said as the two entered the store. "Are you riding there with your family?"

"I guess," Mike answered, shrugging. Finding no one to greet them, he rang a bell.

"You could ride there with El," Will said with a smile.

Mike gave him a look. "You guys won't stop, huh?" Shaking his head, he continued, saying "It wasn't that bad last night. How was the movie?"

"Good," Will answered. "Dustin's obsessing over that actress."

"Hello, gentlemen," an older man said, coming to greet them. "How can I help you?"

"I'm here to pick up a tuxedo?" Mike said. "For the Wheeler-Byers wedding?"

"Ah." The man went behind a counter, and looked at a list. "Are you...Michael Wheeler?"

"Yep."

"I see. Give me a minute, and I'll find it for you." He turned, and disappeared into the back.

Will sat in one of the two chairs in the lobby, and flipped through a magazine.

"When do you guys want to do the campaign?" Mike asked, leaning

against the counter. "I thought we could do it tonight, but with the rehearsal and the party..."

"When do you go back again?" Will asked, looking up.

"Tuesday. What about you?"

Shaking his head, Will answered "I'm staying another week. Dustin goes back on Wednesday."

"And Lucas?"

"He hasn't said yet. Me and Dustin are guessing he's going to go back with Max."

"Yeah, what's up with them?"

Will shrugged his small shoulders. "Beats me."

"Here you are," the older man said, coming out with Mike's tux on a hanger, wrapped in plastic.

"Thank you," Mike said, taking it from him and looking it over. "Do I..do I owe you, or..."

"Already taken care of," the man said. "Have a good day."

After dropping the tux off in Will's car, the two young men made their way over to The Palace. A few things were different; older games had been exchanged for newer ones, fresh paint appeared to be on the walls, and some of the staff they remembered didn't appear to work there anymore. But for Mike, there was still the familiarity of it, as he recounted the hours and weekends he'd spent here (not to mention the hundreds of quarters he'd lost).

"I haven't been here since..." he shook his head, having to think. "I think the summer before college."

"Me and Lucas came at Christmas," Will said. "Look, they still have Dig Dug."

The two went to the game, and Mike juggled the controller to see the high scores. Grinning, he was surprised to see that someone had taken Max's score; someone names LDYKL. Max had the second high score, with Dustin still at third.

"Max isn't going to like this," Mike said. "Wanna play?"

They took turns playing for a little, then, once they ran out of quarters, went and ordered sodas and sat at a table.

"Maybe we can do the campaign on Monday," Will suggested.

Mike nodded. "Hopefully it'll be done by then."

Will looked around them, then looked back at Mike, asking, "So things weren't too weird with El, yesterday?"

"Not really," Mike admitted. "I was kind of surprised. Even weirder, she uh...she got me a gift."

"She what?"

"A telescope."

"Why?"

"It's...a thing between us. I mentioned it to her a long time ago that I wanted one. I guess she remembered."

"What do you think it means?" Will asked, leaning over the table.

Mike shrugged. "I don't think it means anything. I think she was just trying to be nice."

Will nodded, but didn't look like he believed his friend. "But it wasn't weird last night?"

"No, it was nice, actually. I had fun."

There was a sudden *boom!* as someone dropped something, and Will jumped, looking frightened.

"You okay?" Mike asked.

Taking a deep breath, Will nodded. "I'm okay. It's just sometimes..."

"I know," Mike said, understanding.

It'd been years since Will had had any visions or possessions or anything else related to the Upside Down. Still, there were times he got jumpy; especially places that reminded him of those times. The Party knew about it; Will had been through hell and back, and didn't need to explain anything to them.

When Will seemed to have calmed down, he and Mike decided to head home.

At a little before six, the Wheeler family (sans Nancy) piled into the station wagon and drove to the church where tomorrow's wedding would be taking place. Nancy had left hours before to do some last minute planning with her maid of honor.

When they entered the church, Mike smiled at the sea of familiar faces: Dustin and Will, chuckling about something. Jonathan and Nancy, talking to themselves and holding hands. Joyce Byers looking proud, and Hopper and El sitting in the back, talking quietly to one another.

While his parents went to talk to Joyce, and Holly went to see El, Mike went over to see his two friends.

"Where's Lucas?" Mike asked.

Dustin shrugged. "I dunno."

"Wait, why're you here?" Mike asked. "You're not in the wedding."

"Well, it's either here or listen to my mom talk about all the things Tews has been up to."

"Her cat's still alive? Isn't it, like, fifty by now?"

"No, remember, she got a new one, because of..." Dustin did a small roar, and with his hands mimed a Demogorgon mouth. "Dart."

“Mike,” Nancy said, walking over. “You got your tux, right? Taken care of?”

“Yes, geez,” he said.

“Good. Oh! Catrina,” Nancy said, calling over a woman Mike didn’t recognize, “I want you to meet my brother, Mike.”

Catrina had curly brown hair that reminded Mike of a certain someone, and freckles on her nose that reminded him of himself. He shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you,” they said to one another before Nancy whisked her off.

“She’s cute,” Dustin said, watching them go.

“I guess,” Mike said. He turned to see them go, and as he did, his eyes met El’s for a second. He gave her a small wave before looking away. Looking at Will, he asked, “Is your dad coming?”

Will’s face darkened for a moment. “I hope not. Jonathan didn’t want to, but Nancy talked him into sending an invite. We haven’t heard anything.”

As if hearing them, Jonathan made his way over, and greeted Mike. “Thanks for coming.”

Mike shrugged. “Nancy would’ve killed me if I hadn’t.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Yeah, probably. So, after the rehearsal, you guys up for going to get some drinks or something?”

“Yes, definitely,” Dustin said.

“Cool.”

As Mike nodded, he watched as El made her way over to the group. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Will said. Then, to his brother, “When’re we going to get started?”

"Pretty soon. The preacher or pastor or whatever isn't here yet. Let me go ask Nancy." After he walked off, El asked, "Where's Lucas?"

"We were wondering the same thing," Mike said. Turning to her, he said, "Hey, thanks for..."

"Alright!" Joyce called. "Revered Henry's here, everyone."

El looked back at Mike. "What were you going to say?"

"Later," he told her.

The wedding planner soon took over, and everyone was given directions about where to stand and what to do. Those observing-Hopper, Holly, Dustin, and a few other assorted people-sat in the pews, watching.

Not including the bride and groom, there were eight people in the wedding party. Will was the best man, Mike a groomsman, and two friends of Jonathan's from NYU were the others. Nancy had her maid of honor, El, and two friends of hers.

They were practicing the procession to the altar. Each groomsman was paired with a bridesmaid. And, as he predicted, Mike was paired with El.

They would be the last to enter; after getting their instructions, the two went to wait in the vestibule with the rest of the wedding party, standing in pairs behind each other.

"Thanks for the telescope," Mike whispered.

Color came to her cheeks as she kept looking ahead. "You're welcome."

"I still can't believe you remembered that."

"Of course I did," she said. "Oh. Um, I think we're supposed to..." she nodded at the groomsman and bridesmaid in front of them, whose arms were linked.

"Right." Mike stuck his arm out, and El hooked hers with his. Again

he was reminded of days past, how this simple gesture used to be so commonplace with the two of them. But not anymore.

“Did you find out anything about the bachelorette party?” Mike asked quietly.

El shrugged. “They mentioned driving to Indianapolis, and going to a nightclub.” She shook her head. “God, I hope not.”

Mike chuckled. “You were never really one for clubs. Or parties, for that matter.”

“Neither were you,” she teased, lightly nudging him. “Remember that time we tried to go to one?”

“Jennifer Hayes’s party?”

“No, but...” she paused, no doubt smiling about that particular memory. “*That* one was memorable,” their eyes meeting for a moment before they looked away. “I’m talking about the club.”

Mike smiled, remembering. It had been at the beginning of last summer, when, after graduating high school, the Party had driven to the city to try to go to a nightclub. It’d been Dustin’s idea, in hopes of meeting girls for he and Will. Mike, El, Lucas, and Max had been dragged along for the ride. They’d spent almost an hour and a half in the car before Dustin realized he’d missed the exit, then, once they’d reorientated themselves, had ended up at a club in Indianapolis. Mike, not a party person, had complained the whole time. El, though she hadn’t complained nearly as much as Mike, didn’t want to go, either, but had come at the insistence of their friends.

The Party had spent an hour outside, waiting to get in. By the time they were able to enter, Dustin wasn’t impressed, and wanted to go to another club. The group had ended up staying at a hotel that night before driving back to Hawkins the next morning.

“Gosh, that was terrible,” Mike said.

“It wasn’t too bad,” El said. “The hotel was nice.”

What Mike remembered the most was how happy he had felt getting

to share a bed with El without worrying about parents or siblings coming in; and the two had definitely taken advantage of that. He felt his cheeks heat up at that particular memory.

“Are you okay?” she asked, breaking him from his thoughts.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, nodding. Then, looking ahead of him, said, “We’re up.”

It was their turn to make their way down the aisle, and Mike knew Dustin and Will were having a blast at seeing he and El walking together, arm in arm.

When the group was about to run through it one more time, Lucas arrived with Max. Against the wedding planner’s wishes, the group stopped as Mike, El, Will, and Dustin greeted their friends.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were getting her?” Will asked Lucas after everyone had greeted Max.

Lucas shrugged, saying “It was a last minute thing.” But Mike saw the quick glance he and Max gave each other.

“Do you know where we’re going for the bachelorette party?” Max asked El.

El shook her head, saying “I don’t think they have anything set yet. I think it’s just...”

“Excuse me!” the wedding planner called, interrupting the reunion. “But we need to finish rehearsing.”

Max mimicked her, causing the rest of the party to stifle their laughter. “Sorry,” Mike told the planner. “We’ll be right there.” To Max and Lucas, he said, “We’ll catch up later.”

When the rehearsal finished, everyone made their way to Cheryl’s, a restaurant in downtown Hawkins where Joyce was hosting the

rehearsal dinner. The group had their own private room, and it didn't take long for it to fill up with talks about Jonathan and Nancy, among other things.

"Remember when Jonathan..."

"And Nancy..."

The Party members sat at the end of a table in their own conversation. Max caught everybody up with what she'd been up to: attending UCLA, living with an old friend of hers, spending time with her dad, and her job at a sporting goods store.

"You seeing anybody?" Dustin asked, glancing at Lucas to see his reaction.

"No, not really," she answered, stirring her root beer with her straw.

"Oh! I don't think Lucas is, either," Dustin replied.

"Really, man?" Lucas asked.

"Now you know how it feels," Mike said.

"El, you've gotta come out and see me sometime," Max told her friend. "You would love it. The beaches, the sunshine. Plus, you could crash with me! Our couch is a fold out, so...easy peasy."

El shrugged. "Maybe. I have always wanted to go. Isn't it expensive out there, though?"

"Not if you know the right people, and the right places to go."

"She's still got to come see me in New York," Will said.

"And me, too," Dustin said.

"Michigan's pretty much the same as Indiana," Lucas scoffed.

"No it's not!" Dustin said.

"What's so different?"

“Um...well...it has, uh...”

“Oh my gosh, I’ve never seen Dustin at a loss for words,” Max laughed.

“I’m not, it’s just...” he took a moment to think.

El looked to Max. “So are you staying with your parents while you’re in town?”

“Yeah,” she answered, rolling her eyes.

“Billy’s not still there, is he?” Mike asked. The last they’d heard of Billy Hargrove, he was working as a bartender in either Indianapolis or here in Hawkins, Mike wasn’t sure.

Max shook her head. “He got out of here a few months back, my mom told me. She thinks he went to Florida.”

“Good riddance,” Lucas chimed in.

“Apple trees!” Dustin exclaimed. The Party looked at him.

“What?” Will asked.

“Michigan has apple trees.”

“There’s apple trees everywhere, dumbass,” Lucas said.

There was a clinking of a spoon on a glass, and the Party looked up to see Joyce Byers trying to get everyone’s attention. However, most of the room kept talking.

“Hey, everybody, quiet down!” came Hopper’s booming voice. He sat near Joyce, and the room got quiet quickly.

“Still got it,” Mike whispered to El.

“Thank you, Jim,” Joyce said. Then, to everyone else, said “I just wanted to say thank you to everyone for coming out tonight for Jonathan and Nancy, and for coming to the wedding tomorrow. Um, to the Wheelers...Karen and Ted, you raised a wonderful girl, and I

couldn't be more happy to have her in my family."

The crowd *awww'd* .

"So, a toast," Joyce continued, raising her glass. "To the happy couple." Everyone clinked their glasses.

The food came in right after and, as they waited, Will got up to talk to Jonathan, Dustin went to wash his hands, and Max went to go say hi to Joyce. Lucas left a moment after, heading in the same direction as Max.

"Are they dating?" Mike asked El.

"Who?"

"Max and Lucas."

El shrugged. "She hasn't said anything about it."

They sat a moment, until Mike asked, "You two have big plans while she's in town?"

"Probably." The two girls had started out as one-sided enemies, but after things had been cleared up, they'd become good friends.

"Just don't go knocking her off her skateboard," Mike teased.

El blushed, looking down at her lap. "I can't believe I did that."

"I can't believe you thought she liked me."

El smiled, looking up. "I was naive, I didn't know any better. And you're so..." she stopped herself, and looked back down.

"So what?" Mike asked.

"So *good* . Any girl would...fall for that." Looking up, she added, "For you."

Mike didn't know what to say. Without thinking, he said, "Well, my mind was only focused on one girl back then." *Dammit*, he thought after he'd said it, *Was he flirting with her?*

She smiled, and looked as if she were about to say something, when Will came back, followed by Dustin. Before Mike had a chance to say anything else to her, the food was put in front of them, and Max and Lucas had returned.

When dinner ended, everyone went their separate ways. Nancy, El, Max, and the bridesmaids piled into cars and headed one way, while Jonathan, Will, and the rest of the boys got in their cars and drove to a bar.

The Party drove together, with Will telling them that Jonathan hadn't wanted anything big for his bachelor party, just a couple of drinks with some close friends. That's how the group landed at Smitty's, a bar just down the road from where Benny's Burgers used to be.

The Party was 19, and technically not supposed to be in the bar, much less order a drink. But Jonathan knew the bartender, Hal, and was able to talk him into sneaking a few beers for the group.

"To Hal!" Dustin exclaimed. When Hal gave him a look, Dustin lowered his beer. "Sorry," he mouthed.

"To Jonathan and Nancy," Will said a little quieter, raising his own bottle.

"To Jonathan and Nancy," the rest of the group said, raising their bottles.

They each took a swig, then Lucas asked, "So, Mike, have you given Jonathan the talk yet?"

"What talk?" Mike asked as Jonathan listened in.

"You know, the whole...if you ever hurt my sister I'm gonna kill you speech."

"Yeah, Mike, let's hear that," Dustin agreed.

Jonathan smirked at Mike. "Yeah, c'mon."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Don't hurt her, Jonathan, okay? There, you guys happy?"

"Or what?" Jonathan asked, teasing.

"Or...or I'll beat up Will," Mike said, putting his friend in a headlock.

"Get off, get off," Will said, attempting to push Mike away. Mike let him go as the group laughed. Mike patted him on the back, and then looked to Jonathan. "But seriously? Take care of her."

Jonathan nodded, understanding. "I will."

The group played pool for a while until Jonathan and his friends ended up at the bar, talking to Hal while the Party sat at a table, finishing their drinks and cracking jokes.

"You think Hal'll..." Lucas started, slurring his words. Trying again, he said "Hal'll...." He chuckled. "That's too many L's."

The rest of the group laughed. "Dude, you're drunk," Will told him.

"No 'm not," Lucas said. "I only had two."

"Three, you drank one of mine, doofus," Dustin said.

"Okay, three," Lucas admitted. "But may the *fourth* be with you." And with that, he started laughing uncontrollably.

"Oh, God," Mike said.

"I didn't know he was such a lightweight," Will observed.

"Guys, now's the time!" Dustin said.

"Time to what?"

"To ask him about him and Max!"

The other two agreed; with Lucas's defenses down, he may admit to...whatever was going on with them.

"Lucas?" Mike asked, shaking his friend's arm. Lucas, whose laughing

had died down, looked up.

“Yeah?”

“Are you still with Max?”

“Max?” Lucas looked around. “Max is here?”

“No, are you *dating* her?” Will asked.

“Max is pretty,” Lucas said, grinning.

“Oh my gosh he’s so stupid,” Dustin said, leaning on the table. Loudly, he asked, “Are you dating Max, Lucas?”

“I gotta pee,” Lucas said, pushing at Mike, who sat next to him in the booth. “Move so I can pee.”

Mike stood up, and Lucas tumbled out. Dustin shook his head, saying, “I got him” and led Lucas towards the men’s room.

Mike sat back down, and Will shook his head. “Looks like we’re not getting any answers out of him.”

“Guess not.”

Dustin and Lucas came back a few minutes later, with Dustin shaking his head. “*Aaannd* he threw up,” he said, dropping Lucas onto the seat next to Mike. Lucas’s eyes closed immediately.

The boys sat quietly for a minute until Dustin broke the silence, asking Mike, “So what’s going on with you and El?”

“Are you still on this?” Mike asked him.

Dustin shrugged. “I’m just asking.”

“Nothing’s going on,” Mike said. “I told you, we’re friends now.”

“Do you think she’s being nice because, you know...she dumped you?”

“She didn’t *dump* me, Dustin. We both...just decided to end it.”

“That’s not what you said last year,” Will said.

Mike sighed. Technically, she *had* dumped him; or rather, been the one to break up with him. But he didn’t want to admit that. “I was just...mad,” he said, flicking at his napkin.

“Do you think she’s trying to get you back?” Dustin asked.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “What? No . What makes you say that?”

“Well, she got you that gift, and...the way you two look at each other, it’s still like...”

“We’re not getting back together, Dustin,” Mike said. “End of story.”

Dustin put his hands up, dropping the subject.

But now Mike couldn’t stop thinking about it; El was, in general, a kind and generous person. Almost to a fault. But something seemed different about not only the telescope, but the way they’d been since he came back. The last time they’d talked, he hadn’t exactly been the nicest person to her. Was she trying to get him back? And, more importantly, did he want her back?

The party at Jennifer Hayes’ was, to Mike, as lame as a party could get. Granted he hadn’t really been to any parties, and thus didn’t have anything to compare it to, but still...

El seemed like she was having a good time, though. She danced with Will, and talked with a few people. She always ended up sitting with Mike, though, and their hands would find each other’s as she leaned on his shoulder.

After a while, the Party members who attended-Will, Mike, Dustin, and Eleven-got roped into playing Truth or Dare with everyone else.

As they sat in a circle, Mike whispered to a confused Eleven how to play: each person was given a choice of truth or dare from the person who went before them.

Jennifer chose dare, and she and Will had to kiss.

Randy, a boy from Mike's history class chose dare, and he had to do a somersault (he ended up crashing into the couch in Jennifer's basement).

Another girl chose truth, and she had to reveal who she had a crush on.

Dustin also chose truth, and he had to tell whether he'd kissed a girl or not (he had).

When it was Mike's turn, he was afraid Dustin would ask him to say something about El. Not wanting to embarrass her, he chose dare, thinking he'd be asked to either eat or drink something, or some random silly thing.

Instead, Dustin said, "I dare you and El to do 7 minutes in heaven!"

People cheered, while Mike turned as red as an apple. "Really, Dustin?"

"Yes, really, Mikey-boy. Now accept your fate!"

Mike looked to Will for help, but Will was looking at his feet, no doubt happy that it hadn't been him that was about to go into the closet.

El turned to him. "Mike?"

Sighing, Mike took El's hand as he stood. "Fine," he muttered.

The two went into the closet, and Jennifer Hayes closed it behind them. It was dark, but Mike and El could still see one another.

"Mike?" she asked again.

"Yeah, El?"

"What's...7 minutes in heaven?"

Sighing, Mike answered, "We're supposed to be in here and...kiss for 7 minutes."

"Oh." She moved a little closer, and Mike could see a smile on her face. "Okay."

He felt a smile come to his lips as well. Craning his neck, he kissed her

gently, feeling her arms go onto his shoulders as she kissed him back. They parted for a moment, lips still close, when Mike decided to say something.

“El...”

“Yes?”

“I...I love you.”

He could see a look of confusion come to her face as she looked back at him in the dark. “What does that mean?”

Crap , he thought to himself. How do you explain a thing like love? “It, uh..it means that, like...I really like you, El, and I always wanna be around you, and you’re my favorite person, and...”

“Mike?” she said, interrupting him.

“Yeah?”

He saw a smile come to her face. “I already know what it means.”

“You do?”

She nodded.

“Then why did you...”

“I was...” she thought for a second, “Screwing with you?” she said, not sure if that was the right phrase.

He smiled, his hands wrapping around her waist. “Screwing with me, huh? Well, then, I take it back,” he said jokingly.

“No, mouth breather. No take backs.”

“Aww...”

“Besides, I love you too,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She nodded.

"Well, I love you more," he said, bringing her close and kissing her as she giggled softly.

"Okay, guys," they heard Jennifer Hayes say. "It's time to...what the?"

Mike and Eleven pulled apart as they heard Jennifer struggling with the door. Mike looked at El, and even though it was dark, he could see the familiar spot of blood under her nose.

"Are you...keeping it locked?" he asked with a smile.

She nodded her head. "I want more time."

"Guys, I think the door's stuck," they heard Jennifer say.

Smiling, Mike brought his lips back to El's.

3. Vows

May, 1989

It was lunchtime at Hawkins High, and Mike sat at the group's usual table as he awaited his friends. As he opened his pudding cup, his gaze traveled the crowded lunchroom, finally settling on two students who were struggling to put up a poster. He watched, curious what it would say. When they finally got it up, he rolled his eyes as he read it:

Prom '89! Are you Ready?

No, he was not ready, he thought to himself. Little posters had began decorating the school over the last few weeks. Mike, of course, didn't want to go. Any activity where he had to dress up wasn't really a favorite pastime of his. Yes, he'd gone to dances-the most memorable being the Snowball in '84-but prom? Not a fan. He'd be more than happy just sitting at home with El, watching the Star Wars movies.

But, of course, he was well aware that he'd be going. El's eyes had lit up when she began seeing the decorations around school, promoting the annual senior dance.

"You can't have a girlfriend and not go to prom," Lucas had said a few days ago, which Mike had begrudgingly agreed to. Now all he had to do was ask her.

"Mike," Dustin said as he and Will made their way to join him, "Will you tell our friend here that he'll find a date for prom?"

"Will, you'll find a date," Mike assured him as the other boys joined him.

"Easy for you to say," Will said, opening his pudding cup. Will and Jennifer Hayes had called it quits almost a year ago.

Lucas and Max joined the group a few minutes later, and Mike did a quick scan of the lunchroom. "Where's El?" he asked.

"Relax, Wheeler," Max said. "She had to run to the bathroom. She's

coming.”

Mike nodded.

“Speaking of which, why haven’t you asked her to prom yet?” Max asked, a sly grin on her face.

“Why haven’t I...she wants to go?”

“Mike, of course she wants to go,” Dustin said. “Every girl wants to go to prom, idiot.” Shaking his head, he added “Sometimes your total obliviousness...”

“Just blows your mind, yeah, I get it,” Mike said. To Max, he asked, “Is she mad?”

“No, she’s not mad,” Max said, looking over her sandwich. Not happy with how it looked, she put it back down. “She’s just surprised, is all.”

“I thought you’d be all over it,” Lucas said.

“I’m gonna ask her,” Mike admitted. “I just haven’t found the right time yet.”

“It’s not like you’re asking her to marry you,” Dustin said. Then, getting serious, he asked, “Oh my gosh you’re not, are you?”

“No, Dustin,” Mike answered. Over their heads he could see El enter the lunchroom. She headed to the hot lunch line.

“Well, I may have, uh...set the bar pretty high,” Max said.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked, looking at the redhead.

“I, uh...told her about these other girls I know, whose boyfriends went all out when asking their girlfriends. And now I think she’s kind of hoping for something special.”

“Like I did?” Lucas asked.

Max snorted. “Uh, asking me on a note you passed to me in Spanish isn’t exactly special, stalker.”

"You asked her with a note?" Will asked, chuckling. Mike watched as El, tray in her hands, made her way over. She saw him watching her, and smiled.

"I thought it was a romantic gesture," Lucas said, shrugging.

As El finally arrived at the table and took her spot next to Mike, the wheels were already turning in his head on how he could ask her in a special, non-note way.

August 12, 1990

The day of the wedding, Mike woke up with a slight headache but not a full-blown hangover. Turning in his old bed, his eyes once again caught on the boxed telescope, the gift from El that stood next to his suitcase.

El...

He got out of bed, thinking of last night's conversation with the guys: their theory that El wanted to get back with him, and that this gift, and the kindness she'd shown since he'd come back to town, were all a part of her master plan to get back with him. Since the break up, they'd spoken a total of four times-once in November, when he'd come home for Thanksgiving. Again at Christmas, over the phone in January, and once more in February.

The Thanksgiving discourse between them had been...not so good. Mostly (okay, *all of it*) due to him still being mad about the breakup.

At Christmas, though, he'd made an effort; but it was *her* that didn't really want to talk to him, it seemed. He'd been in Hawkins for a week and a half, and they'd probably talked no more than fifteen minutes total.

In January, she called about a sweater she'd left at his apartment in Boston. Their talk had been brief, but civil.

Finally, they talked again in February when he'd come home for a weekend, wanting a break from school. They'd been friendly, though they'd only seen each other one of the days he was home.

If he were honest with himself, he did miss her. Lucas, Dustin, and Will would always be his best friends, but he and El's relationship was something different. It wasn't just that she was his girlfriend, it was almost like she'd been the missing piece of him he didn't know he'd needed. The last year had been difficult. He hadn't dated anyone, and as far as he knew, neither had she. Did she miss him? he wondered.

Shaking his head, he got up to go find some aspirin.

There wasn't any in the bathroom, so he went down to the kitchen, where surely his mom must keep some. His mother was at the stove, cooking breakfast, but with a little spring in her step, no doubt due to the fact that her eldest daughter was getting married today.

"Hey," she said to him as he went to a cupboard. "Breakfast will be ready soon."

"Thanks. Where's the aspirin?" he asked, squinting into the cupboard.

"Over here," she answered, nodding to a drawer next to her. As he retrieved the bottle, she asked him, "So how was the party last night?"

"We had a good time."

"Everybody make it home okay?"

"Yeah. I was little worried about Lucas, because..." he stopped as he remembered something.

His mom turned around. "Because of what?"

"Nothing. I just forgot...something." Or some *one* he thought to himself. He popped two aspirin into his mouth, and went down to the basement.

Lucas lay on his stomach on the basement's couch with a blanket

over him. Hewas snoring so loudly Mike was surprised his mother hadn't heard him.

"Lucas," he said, shaking him. When that didn't work, he tried it again. Luckily, the second time was the charm, as Lucas let out a moan and turned to his back. He put a hand on over his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Like, nine or something," Mike answered.

"Mm." Removing his hand, he blinked himself into awareness. "Why am I in your basement?"

"We couldn't find the keys to your parent's house," Mike said. "So we brought you down here."

Lucas nodded, as if that made sense. "Okay."

From upstairs, he heard his mom call down, asking "Mike? Is Lucas staying over for breakfast?"

Mike's head spun as he looked at the upstairs door and then back at his friend. "She knew you were here?"

"Who do you think gave me the blanket?" Lucas asked, getting up.

Breakfast was the usual; eggs, bacon, and waffles. Mike did his usual syrup on eggs thing, making his siblings and his friend make a face at it.

Similar to the day before, Nancy had only a small amount of food on her plate.

"You're not gonna gain ten pounds in a few hours," Mike told her. "Get some more."

He started to slide a bacon strip onto her plate, but she batted his hand away. "Stop."

"What'd you guys get up to last night?" Mike asked her.

Nancy shrugged. "We just had a good time. What about you, where'd the groomsmen go?"

"Nowhere special," Mike answered.

Smiling, Nancy said, "I see you and El are getting along just fine."

Mike rolled his eyes. "You too?"

Lucas chuckled.

"What?" Nancy asked, eyes wide and voice innocent. "I'm just surprised, is all."

"As I've told everyone else," Mike said, "We're still just friends. That's all."

"You two were in love for, like, five years," Lucas added.

"Yeah, you don't just go from being in love to being friends like that," Nancy said, snapping her fingers.

"Can we not talk about this now?" Mike asked.

"Yes, please," Karen said. "This may be our last breakfast together for a while, so please..."

"Oh my gosh, *mom*," Nancy said.

"Don't ever leave, or she may lose her mind," Mike whispered to Holly. She grinned.

"What time are you going to the church?" Lucas asked Mike.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Five, maybe?"

"*Mike*," Nancy said, "The pictures."

"What?"

Rolling her eyes once more, she said, "You and Will have to get there early. We're taking pictures of the bridesmaids and the groomsmen."

“Together? Isn’t that bad luck or something?” Lucas asked.

“Not *together*,” Nancy answered. “But you’ve got to be there by four.”

“Alright,” Mike said. “Guess I’ll get a ride with Will, then.”

Holly cleared the dishes after breakfast, and Lucas headed to his parent’s home just down the street. At noon the bridesmaids arrived, and the women quickly took over the downstairs, taking turns in the bathroom to change as well as get hair and makeup touched up. Ted Wheeler ended up retreating to his room for some peace and quiet; Holly stayed downstairs, getting her hair done. Mike went down to his safe haven, the basement, and worked on the campaign while he awaited Will’s three-thirty pickup.

He was about an hour into his work when he heard the basement door open and a familiar voice call down, “Mike?”

“Yeah, I’m here” he called back.

He heard footsteps on the stairs, and as he looked up saw El as she made the descent into the basement. She wasn’t in her dress yet, but her hair was up, with two stray strands on either side of her face, framing it. The word *pretty* flashed through his mind.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey. You guys having fun up there?”

She smiled, taking a seat at the game table with him. “We are. Well, *they* are. Nancy’s so excited. Your mom is, too.”

“I think she’ll probably cry at the wedding, if she isn’t already.”

El giggled, then added, “I’m waiting for my turn to change, and I thought I’d come say hi.”

Mike nodded. “How was it last night? The bachelorette party? Did you guys end up going to a club?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We did go to the city, but we didn’t go to a club. It was some fancy wine place. What about you?”

“We just went to a bar. Lucas got drunk and threw up.”

She laughed. “Really? I haven’t seen him drunk before.”

“You probably will tonight, if there’s a bar at the reception.”

Seeing his notebook, she asked, “Are you making a campaign?”

“Yeah, I told the guys I’d try to have one up and running by tomorrow.”

She smiled, and he suddenly hoped she wasn’t going to ask to be included. He’d been working on this particular campaign for a week now and, not knowing how things would be between the two of them, hadn’t included her in the story. He hadn’t included Max, either, but Max wasn’t the biggest D & D fan anyway.

“I may come watch you guys play,” she said. “It’s great seeing everyone while you guys are here.”

The upstairs door opened, and Karen called down “El, you’re up!”

“That’s my cue,” she said, standing. She got to the stairs, then turned around. “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s been really good seeing you again.”

“You too, El,” he said, and truly meant it.

She smiled again, then climbed up the stairs.

Mike watched her go, and thought about how sincere his words were. Months ago, he didn’t think he’d be able to say that to her and be honest. He was happy they were in a good place.

When Will picked him up, the bridesmaids, Nancy, Holly, and their

mother had already left, off to take some pictures. The groomsmen were meeting at the church to get their pictures taken as well.

When Mike and Will arrived, Jonathan and the two other groomsmen were standing outside the church, chatting. Mike hadn't seen his sister before she'd left, but if what El had said was true, she and Jonathan were a match made in heaven. Mike didn't know if he'd ever seen Jonathan this happy, and it suddenly dawned on him that in a few hours from now, this guy, his friend's goofy older brother, would be marrying his big sister.

It'd been awkward at first, when the two had started dating. Mike wasn't the biggest fan of Nancy dating Steve, because the word around town was that he was a big jerk. But when she and Jonathan started dating, it had been a surprise to Mike. The two older teens had always been civil towards each other, but neither Mike nor Will had ever imagined them dating, let alone getting married.

It seemed like yesterday when Mike and Nancy were at the school, getting supplies for El's "bath," that Mike had asked her if she liked Jonathan. She'd lied, at least to herself, she told him years later.

Then again, he'd lied about El, too.

He'd known pretty soon after meeting her that there was something special about El. Not just her abilities, or, as Lucas so eloquently put it, that she wasn't "grossed out by him." He and El just clicked in a way that she hadn't with the others. Even now, after their breaking up, he still felt a tug towards her, one that he wasn't sure would ever go away.

"Looking good, guys," Jonathan said to Will and Mike as they met up. "Your tie's not straight, though," he said to Mike.

"What? Oh," he said, looking down.

"Mike, it's a clip on, how do you make a clip on crooked?" Will asked.

Mike shrugged, straightening it out.

"Got your speech all ready?" Jonathan asked his brother.

“Uh...as ready as it's gonna be, I guess,” Will said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Thanks again for doing this, guys,” Jonathan told the assorted men. “I really appreciate it.”

“Just don't chicken out,” Mike said. “Nancy's all excited.”

Jonathan grinned. “I won't.”

After the group had their pictures taken, the boys were sent into a room in the church as they awaited the ceremony. While Will chatted with his brother, Mike dipped into the hallway to watch people arrive. It was a sea of familiar and not familiar faces; distant relatives, classmates of Nancy and Jonathan's, and some friends of the family he hadn't seen in a while.

Dustin, Max, and Lucas showed up together, the boys in suits while Max wore a dark blue dress.

“Looking good, Wheeler,” she said as they entered the vestibule.

“Thanks.”

“How's Jonathan holding up?” Dustin asked.

“He's fine.”

“Where's El?” asked Max.

Mike shrugged. “I haven't seen her.”

“Oh, man, the whole gang's here,” said a voice behind them. They turned and saw Steve walk into the church. Looking at Max, he asked, “How's it going, lead foot?”

“Pretty good, hairdo.”

Steve grinned. “I'll see you guys inside, alright?” With that, he walked into the sanctuary.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Max asked the boys.

Lucas shrugged. “He said he was invited.”

“He’s not going to, like, profess his love for Nancy in the middle of the ceremony, is he?”

“That’d be so awesome,” Dustin said.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Mike said. “Steve’s smarter than that, right?”

The group shrugged their shoulders.

“Michael!” they heard a voice call. Turning, they saw Karen Wheeler, all dressed up, walking quickly to where they stood. “I need you to give this to your sister,” she said, shoving a necklace into his hand.

He looked down at it, then back at his mother. “Wait, what?”

“I have to go deal with your grandmother. Apparently your father didn’t save a spot for her,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Give it to Nancy,” she said, pointing towards a door as she walked away.

Shrugging, Dustin said, “Guess you better go give it to Nancy.”

“Yeah, we’ll see you inside,” Lucas said, patting Mike’s shoulder.

“Break a leg,” Max said as the trio made their way into the sanctuary.

Mike went to the door his mom had pointed out, and knocked on it.

“Yes?” he heard his sister ask.

“Nance, it’s me,” he said. “Can I come in for a minute?”

“Yeah, come in, Mike.”

He opened the door, and saw his sister in her wedding dress, standing in front of a mirror. The other bridesmaids were scattered around the small room, quietly talking to one another. He didn’t see El or the maid of honor.

Turning to Nancy again, he was immediately taken aback. Mike

normally wasn't one to compliment his sister, but Nancy looked beautiful and radiant in her gown. She looked at him in the mirror and smiled. "What's up?"

"Uh...mom wanted me to give you this," he said, holding out the necklace.

"Oh," she said, walking over and taking it from him. "Thanks. This is my 'something borrowed'."

"Nance, uh...you look really nice," he told her.

She smiled. "Thanks, Mike. So do you." Shaking her head, she said, "I can't believe it's today." Looking at her brother, she asked, "You're not gonna cry on me out there, are you?"

"Are you?"

She shook her head. "I'm not a crier."

"Bull."

She grinned; they both knew she was. "I don't think so. Besides, mom's been crying enough for the whole family."

There was a knock at the door, and Mike turned to see it open, and he felt his eyes widen as El entered the room. She wore the same pale pink dress as the other bridesmaids; but Mike didn't know if it was that the gown reminded him of a pink dress she'd worn once upon a time, or the light makeup she wore, or something else entirely, but he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

His eyes met hers, and he saw a shy smile come to her lips as her cheeks reddened briefly.

"Hey El," he said, his eyes not leaving hers.

"Hi Mike," she said. Then, looking at the other bridesmaids, she said, "Catrina needs to see us outside for a minute."

The other bridesmaids nodded, and the ladies left the room.

Mike turned back to his sister, who had a smug look on her face. "What?" he asked.

"You know what," she said. "Are you going to ogle her during the whole reception?"

"I wasn't...ogling her," he said, but even he didn't believe that.

"Right." Nancy turned her back to him, and held her hair up. "Can you put the necklace on me?"

Sighing, he wrapped the piece of jewelry around her neck, but struggled with fastening the clasp. "I don't know if I can..." he mumbled.

"Mike, I've seen you put necklaces on El a million times, you can put one on me."

Finally clasping it, he nodded, saying "Okay, got it."

"Thank you," she said, releasing her hair. Turning back around, she gave him a hug.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just...thank you for being here."

"You're welcome," he said as they released. "Well, I guess I'll see you out there."

"Mike? Can I give you a piece of sisterly advice?" she asked before he turned to leave.

"What?"

"If you still have feelings for her, you need to tell her."

"I don't," he said, shaking his head.

"Mike," she said, grinning. "You obviously still feel something for her. And don't tell me," she said, just as he was prepared to retort, "That it's just friendly. The way you two looked at each other just

now, I don't think it's over. And as someone who's spent the better part of the last five years tiptoeing around how I felt about someone, don't leave anything to chance."

Mike sighed, but nodded his head. "Okay," he said softly.

About twenty minutes later the ceremony was set to begin. The wedding party lined up outside of the sanctuary doors, pairing up. As he linked arms with El, he couldn't help but glance once more at her in the pink dress.

She noticed, and looked down as her cheeks heated up once more as she smiled shyly again.

"I'm sorry," he said, finally turning away. "You, uh...you look really nice, El."

"Thank you," she whispered. "So do you."

He felt himself blush as the doors to the sanctuary opened. After a pause, Catrina and Will entered, followed by the next two members of the bridal party, then the next two, and then, finally, Mike and El.

They stood on opposite ends of the altar. The reverend asked everyone to stand, and after a moment The Bridal Chorus began to play. Everyone's eyes turned to the doors as they reopened, and Nancy walked in, arm linked with their dad.

Mike had to admit, Nancy looked beautiful. And as he glanced at Jonathan, he could see that he thought the same. And sure enough, Karen Wheeler was wiping her eyes as her daughter and husband made their way down the aisle. Across the aisle from his family, Mike saw Joyce Byers having a similar reaction, smiling at her future daughter-in-law while looking up at the altar with pride at her two sons, a tissue in her own hand.

The song ended when Mike's dad and sister got to the altar. Ted gave her a kiss on the cheek, then she took Jonathan's hand as the two made their way up the steps in front of the reverend.

“You may be seated,” the reverend announced.

The ceremony continued, with the reverend going through the usual “We are gathered here today...” spiel. Jonathan and Nancy kept stealing glances at one another, and whenever Mike was able to see their faces, he saw nothing but love for one another. By the time they were presented as husband and wife, both Jonathan and Nancy had tears in their eyes. *I knew she’d cry*, Mike thought to himself.

As The Wedding March began to play, the wedding party exited the sanctuary as people around them clapped for the new couple.

When they made their way out, the group waited for what their next set of directions would be.

Mike had walked out with El, arms linked, and they now disbanded as he noticed the tears in her eyes. She saw him looking, and wiped them away.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No, don’t be,” he said, shaking his head. “It was...it was a good ceremony.”

She nodded, smiling. “They look so happy.”

“I know. I’m proud of them.”

They both turned as Will made his way over, a big smile on his face. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Will,” El said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks I guess,” he shrugged. “My mom’s a mess, did you see her out there?”

“Did you see *my* mom?” Mike asked. “What’re we doing next, do you know?”

“More pictures, I think,” Will answered.

“Oh, gosh,” Mike replied, rolling his eyes.

Sure enough, minutes later, the group was ushered outside to take more pictures. There were pictures of the whole wedding party; of the Byers side with Nancy and Jonathan; then the Wheelers with Nancy and Jonathan. Then the groomsmen with the bride, then the bridesmaids with the groom.

During one of their breaks, Mike asked Will, “Does your face hurt? Mine does from all this nonstop smiling.”

“Just power through,” Will encouraged.

Eventually the photos were finished, and they all made their way to the nearby reception hall.

Circular tables were spread throughout the Hawkins community center, where the reception was taking place. It looked almost identical to when the group had been here for prom, a little more than a year ago. Along the wall near the entrance was a long, rectangular table where the wedding party would be sitting. By the time wedding photos were taken and Mike, Will, El, and the newlywed couple arrived, the hall was filled with guests as they eagerly awaited the bride, groom, and the meal.

The DJ introduced Jonathan and Nancy first, and they entered to a standing ovation. The groomsmen and bridesmaids entered next, paired up once again. The bridesmaids sat on Nancy’s left while the groomsmen sat to Jonathan’s right, with the bride and groom in the middle.

Soon after entering, dinner was served, and Mike kept looking into the crowd of people, searching for his friends. He eventually saw Dustin, Lucas, and Max at a table not too far from his parent’s. Steve was sitting with them.

Karen Wheeler came over to say hi a few times, as did Holly (who also ran down to talk to El). A few times the guests would tap their glasses, causing Jonathan and Nancy to pause from their meal and

share a kiss. Once or twice Mike's eyes would wander towards El before he righted himself.

When most of those assembled had finished their meal it was time for the speeches from the best man and the maid of honor. As Will stood up, Mike could see his friend was nervous.

"Um..." he began, "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Will, Jonathan's brother. One thing that Jonathan doesn't know, or, at least that I never told him, is how I've always looked up to him. I remember when we were little, admiring how good he was with a camera. But I could tell, even at a young age, how good he was with taking pictures and I knew I could never be as talented. So he inspired me to make my own kind of pictures, by drawing." He paused, then continued, saying "But it wasn't just that. Our, uh...our dad wasn't really around. So Jonathan kind of taught me things he would've. I learned how to shave, what good music is...Mom taught me how to drive, but if you ask me, Jonathan was the better teacher." The crowd laughed. "But, uh...he's still teaching me things to this day. When I see him and Nancy look at one another, I know that someday I want what they have. He's given me something to aspire to. So..." He raised his glass of water, "Thank you Jonathan, for being my example, and here's to you and Nancy."

Everyone else raised their glasses in a toast, and people clapped.

Catrina, the maid of honor, made her speech next, but to Mike it wasn't nearly as good as Will's had been.

After Katrina's speech, the newlyweds made their way to the dance floor. As they began swaying to "With or Without You", Lucas, Dustin, and Max made their way to see their friends.

"Good speech, Byers," Max said, lightly punching Will's arm. "You had this guy crying," she added, nodding at Dustin.

"No!" Dustin exclaimed. "The air conditioning was just blowing in my eye, that's all."

"Yeah, right," Lucas said as El made her way over.

“Max, you look great,” El said to her friend as the two hugged.

“Thanks, you too.”

“So, we all ready to tear the dance floor up?” Lucas asked everyone.

Mike and El’s eyes met for a moment, then he looked back at Lucas. “I’m probably not going to do any dancing. I might dance with Nancy or something,” he shrugged.

After the bride and groom danced, Jonathan danced with Joyce, then Nancy with Ted. Then the dancefloor opened up to the general public.

A bridesmaid asked Will to dance, and the two of them made their way to the dancefloor. Dustin went to go talk to Steve, who was congratulating Nancy and Jonathan.

“Come on, stalker,” Max said, taking Lucas’s hand and leading him to the floor.

Mike and El glanced at each other and smiled. “I’m gonna go get some punch,” he told her. “You want any?”

“No thank you,” she said, shaking her head.

“Okay. Be right back.”

When he returned, she was sitting back at the table where the wedding party was before; now empty except for the two of them. He sat down, leaving a chair between them as the music slowed down to a ballad, “Take My Breath Away.”

“I love this song,” El said quietly, almost to herself.

Mike nodded, and half considered asking her if she wanted to dance, but brought his cup to his lips instead.

They watched the couples dance for a minute-Will with the bridesmaid, Lucas and Max; even Mike’s parents were dancing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike saw one of the groomsmen,

Ronnie, making his way over to where they were sitting. Mike figured he was here to get his jacket; a lot of the groomsmen had left their jackets on the back of their chairs. That's why he was surprised as Ronnie gave Mike a quick nod, then walked over to El.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked her.

Suddenly, and he didn't know why, Mike felt himself growing... *jealous* as he awaited El's answer.

She looked at Ronnie and gave a polite smile as she shook her head. "No thank you. Thanks, though."

And just like that, Mike felt himself able to breathe.

He sat back, letting out a quiet breath as Ronnie walked off to find someone else to dance with. *What is wrong with me?* Mike thought to himself.

When the song ended, the rest of the party made their ways to the front table with Mike and El.

"Where were you, Mike?" Lucas asked.

Mike shrugged. "I didn't feel like dancing."

"Did you get her number, Will?" Dustin asked, nodding towards the bridesmaid, Joanna, that he'd been dancing with.

"What? No," Will said, slightly blushing. "It's not like that."

"Sure," Max said. Standing, she looked at El and said, "I'm going to the bathroom. Need to?"

El nodded, standing up. The two girls walked off together.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Lucas asked Mike.

"What?"

"El's *begging* you to ask her to dance," he replied.

"No she's not," Mike said, shaking his head.

"It's in her eyes," Dustin said.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever, man. Better ask her before someone else snatches her up, is all I'm saying."

Mike sighed, tired of the conversation. But then he thought back to the sudden bout of jealousy when Ronnie had asked her to dance. Why did she say no?

A few minutes later the music changed, and Mike heard a familiar guitar strum as he recognized the song "Every Breath You Take."

"Really, guys?" he asked, looking at his friends.

"It wasn't me!" Dustin said.

"Me either," Will said, shaking his head.

"Wasn't me," Lucas said. "But this is hilarious."

Mike groaned as Max and El made their ways back over, laughing about something. Max looked at the boys. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Dustin said, grinning. "I'm gonna go ask the maid of honor to dance."

"See if Nancy'll dance with you again!" Lucas called. Dustin gave him the finger as he kept walking.

"What's he talking about?" Max asked. Then, paying attention to the song, grinned. "Oh, yeah." She looked at Mike with a smug grin.

El, for her part, seemed to be oblivious as to what was going on, as she watched the people dancing.

Sighing, Mike stood up. "El?"

She turned. "Yes?"

"Do you, uh...do you want to dance?"

Her eyes widened for a moment, before a smile came to her face as she nodded. "Sure."

The two made their way to the dancefloor. "You remember how to dance?" he teased.

"If not, we can figure it out," she said, grinning.

He smiled back, as he put his hands on her hips, with hers going to his shoulders.

They swayed, with memories coming back to Mike from the first time they'd danced to this song. El entering the gymnasium, how their eyes had met across the room. The kiss...

As if reading his mind, she asked, "Are you thinking about the snowball?"

He nodded. "Seems like it was a lifetime ago."

She shrugged. "It has been six years..."

"When was the last time we danced?" he asked.

She smiled up at him. "Prom."

"Oh, yeah," he said, remembering. "Do you remember how I asked you to go?"

She giggled, nodding. "Of course I remember." Looking up at him, she said, "Classic Mike."

As the song reached its crescendo, Mike felt the same urge he'd felt that first time they'd danced to this song; to lean in and kiss her. Their eyes met just as the song reached its peak, but Mike couldn't bring himself to do it. As they continued dancing, he thought he saw a flash of disappointment cross El's face.

When the song was over, he looked down at her and smiled. "I forgot how easy you picked up dancing."

She shrugged, as the two walked back to their friends, side by side.

“It’s not hard.”

Max and Lucas were waiting for them. Over the next hour, the party danced (Dustin with Catrina, Will-again-with Joanna, El and Holly, Mike with Nancy, and Lucas and Max), some talked (Max and El, the boys) until some people decided to call it a night.

Max and Lucas were the first ones to go, after saying goodbye to their friends, as well as promising to meet up in Mike’s basement tomorrow.

Dustin left soon after, getting a ride back home with Steve.

Mike sat at a table, talking to a slowly fading Holly, when El came over. “Could I get a ride home?”

He looked up, surprised. “Hopper’s not gonna drive you?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “He says he’s not ready to go.”

“Uh...I don’t have a car, I came here with Will.”

They both turned to look at Will, who was still talking with Joanna. “Oh.”

Glancing down at a sleepy Holly, he said, “But I can see if he’ll let me use his car. I think he might be going home with Joanna.”

She smiled, as he got up. Crossing the room, he walked to his friend. “Hey, Will, you got a second?”

Will nodded, and the two stepped over. “Uh,” Mike began, “Can I borrow your car? To take El and Holly home?”

Will smiled, as he dug into his pocket. “Taking El home, huh?”

“*And* my sister,” Mike clarified.

“I’ll get a ride home with my mom,” Will said, handing over the keys. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Mike said, taking the keys.

When he told his parents he'd take Holly home, they decided that they, too, would be on their way out, and would take Holly themselves. Mike decided he'd still take El.

The drive to the Hopper home was mostly quiet, with the two talking about the wedding, Max and Lucas, and Will's chances with the bridesmaid.

Mike parked in the driveway when they arrived. Turning to him, El said, "Well, thanks."

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded, and got out of the car. She'd just made it to the door when Mike saw that her keys had fallen out of her purse. Grabbing them, he climbed out of the car.

"Hey, El?" he called. "Forgot these," he said, holding them up.

"Oh," she said, turning around. "Thanks."

He climbed up the steps and handed them to her. "Wouldn't want you to have to wait until Hopper got home."

"Yeah, that'd suck." Looking up at him, she said, "Thanks, Mike."

He nodded. "Yep. "Um...well...goodnight, El."

She nodded, too, and gave him a hug. "Goodnight, Mike" she whispered into his chest.

They pulled away, but her arms stayed on his shoulders while his stayed at her sides. He watched as El smiled, and then, surprisingly, leaned in and pressed her lips to his for a brief kiss.

He pulled away, surprised, as her eyes searched his face, looking for a reaction. But then Mike was the one leaning in, kissing her back. And all of a sudden a dozen images flashed through his mind, reliving similar memories of date-night drop offs and goodnight kisses in front of her door. He felt her hands met behind his neck as his arms

wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer as he deepened the kiss.

After a minute, they slowly pulled back, but not before she leaned in once more and gave him another brief kiss.

Their foreheads touching, Mike mumbled "Um...I, uh...I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Yeah," she breathed.

They finally let go, and Mike slowly turned and made the walk to the car. As he got in, he watched her go into the house before he started the car and headed to his parent's house, wondering what the hell he'd just done.

It took an expensive trip to Bradley's Big Buy, but Mike was finally ready to ask El to prom. The day before he was to ask, Friday, he visited Hopper at the station to get early access to the house, which the chief agreed to.

El woke up Saturday morning to a gentle knocking at her door. Which was surprising, because Hopper usually liked to sleep in on his days off; she was usually the first to wake up on the weekends.

"El?" came his voice from the other side of her door. "You up?"

"Yes," she responded, rolling onto her back.

"Come on down for breakfast."

*"Give me a minute," she said back before she heard his footsteps recede. Climbing out from under her covers, she ran through in her mind what to do today. The Party was going to spend time at Mike's playing video games, and then she and Max were going to the mall to do some shopping, then going to The Hawk to watch Road House (Max thought Swayze was cute). The shopping was for Max's prom dress, which Mike *still* had not asked her to go to. Prom was in two weeks, and if he didn't ask her soon,*

she might have to say something.

As she walked into the kitchen, she was surprised to see Mike by the toaster.

“Mike? What’re you doing here?”

“Serving you breakfast,” he said. “Can you give me a hand with this?”

*She started to walk over. “It’s sweet of you to make breakfast, but you could’ve...” she stopped as she neared him. There was a *lot* of waffles in front of him. 22, to be exact.*

She raised an eyebrow. “Why’d you make so many?”

“No reason,” he answered, smiling at her.

She picked up two plates and took them to the table. She got a few more before she sat down.

“Do you want some orange juice?” he asked.

“Uh...okay,” she said. As she waited, she looked down at the six plates in front of her. When she’d carried them over, she’d noticed they already had syrup, but looking closer she saw what resembled...letters. She turned around one of the plates, and saw the letter “O.”

“Mike?” she asked, looking over her shoulder. “What is this?”

She saw him blush before he answered. “I, uh...wanted to ask you something.” He put her orange juice down, then didn’t say anything else until he brought the remaining plates over.

“Mike?”

Still not answering, she watched as he shuffled the plates around, a look of concentration on his face. When he appeared to be done, he stepped back and looked at her, beaming. She looked at the groups of plates, and it took a minute before it hit her that it was a question:

W-I-L-L

Y-O-U

G-O

T-O

P-R-O-M

W-I-T-H

M-E?

*She looked up at him, and her face almost hurt, she was smiling so wide.
"Yes!" she said, jumping out of her chair and into his arms.*

She gave him a kiss before they pulled away.

"You guys better eat all of those," Hopper called from the other room.

El laughed as she took Mike's hand. The two sat down and began to eat.

4. Broken Promises

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for the generous comments! I really appreciate it.

October, 1989

The bus ride to Boston took longer than El had originally thought it would, and she was glad she'd be taking a train back instead. Mike (as well as everyone else) had suggested she fly out, but El had never flown before, and she wanted to fly with a friend in case it got scary.

When the bus finally pulled into the town, she looked through her window in awe at the sites she'd read about in the guide during the trip. It was so different from Hawkins. How lucky for Mike, he gets to see this everyday now, she thought to herself.

But the excitement soon turned into nervousness as the bus pulled into the station. Recently, things had been tense between her and Mike, and she was hoping during this trip they could work things out.

When the bus came to a stop, she grabbed her duffel bag from the empty seat next to her, and waited until it was her turn to debus. Stepping out onto the platform, her eyes scanned the crowd until she saw the familiar mop of black hair, towering above most of the other people.

"Mike!" she called, running over to him.

She watched as he smiled, and rushed to get over to her. They met halfway, hugging each other tightly.

"I missed you," she whispered to him.

"I missed you, too, El," he said, rubbing her back.

He took her bag, and took her hand as they walked out of the station.

"Do you want to go back to my apartment first?" he asked, "Or do you want to get something to eat? I didn't know how hungry you were..."

"We can go to your apartment," she said. "Gives me a chance to see it, now that you actually have stuff in it."

He nodded, pulling her closer to him.

She had came out with him when he'd first moved, about a month and a half ago. She and the Wheeler family had all driven from Hawkins to make sure Mike was moved in properly. She'd been meaning to come back sooner, but...

When Mike first got accepted into MIT, they'd both been so excited. El hadn't enrolled anywhere, as she wanted to take a year off to take care of, as well as bond with, her mother. This was also the cause of why it'd been tense between them lately. The original plan had been that El would spend a year helping her aunt Becky take care of her mom, while working and saving money so that in a year from now, she would move to Boston and join Mike. She knew she wasn't particularly MIT material, but El was a very smart woman and was hoping to enroll in one of the other universities in the area.

*Then her mom seemed to take a turn for the worse, and El had to cancel her trip to visit Mike in September. He'd been understanding on the phone, and they'd made plans for her to come out the first weekend in October. But then **that** one had to be canceled as well, as Becky continued to need El's help with Terry. Which had caused a semi-fight between Mike and El.*

It'd happened over the phone, after El had a long day of helping out with her mom. She called Mike, apologizing for having to cancel at the last minute. Mike had listened, at first, but after a bit she could tell something was off with his tone, and both sides came to a tipping point:

"Mike, what is it?" she'd asked.

"Nothing, El. It's just..."

"What?"

"Is it always going to be like this?"

“What, choosing my family?”

“That’s not what I said...”

“But is that what you meant?”

He’d paused, then said, “Well...”

“Mike, she’s my mom! She and Becky are the only family I have.”

He’d sighed, then said “I’m your family, too, El.”

“You know what I mean. Why are you making me out to be the bad guy here, Mike? If this was your mom, would you be guilt-tripping me?”

“That’s not fair, El.”

“Why? Because your mom is healthy and mine’s not?”

He’d sighed, then said, “Look, I’m sorry, okay? I...I love you, El. I just...I miss you, is all.”

She’d sighed into the phone as well. Sniffing, as she felt tears coming, she said, “I’m sorry, too. I miss you, too, Mike. God, I miss you. I’m just...I hate this.”

“I know. You’ll see me when you can, okay? But don’t...don’t rush. Come when you can.”

She’d nodded, even though she knew he couldn’t see her over the phone. “I will, Mike. I promise.”

And now, two weeks later, here she was in Boston for the weekend.

Friday was spent eating dinner, holding each other, and plenty of making up.

Saturday they got lunch with some of his friends, and he showed her where he worked. They then walked around the Public Gardens, and after got a quick bite to eat before they headed back to his place to rent a movie.

But Saturday night, as she lay in his arms in bed, she thought about their

future; and some unpleasant thoughts that'd been circling around in her mind for the past month came back to her. She was leaving tomorrow, and wasn't sure when she'd be able to come back. He had a whole life here, she thought to herself. Was it fair of her to make him wait for her? What if her mom continued to get worse? It wouldn't be right of her to make him continue to wait.

Unsure, she snuggled into his side as sleep overtook her.

August 13, 1990

El hadn't meant to kiss Mike last night.

But boy, was she glad she had.

Getting out of bed, she felt something she hadn't felt since Mike had come to town: hope.

Hope that they could work things out between them.

Hope that maybe he still had feelings for her.

Hope that they could still get back together.

Hope that this whole endeavor hadn't been a mistake.

She had been the one to break up with him; and not a day had gone by that she didn't regret it. Letting go of her relationship with Mike had been one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. Not only because it was her longest lasting one, but because before him, she hadn't known what friendship was, what love was...Her life before him had been empty and alone.

And then she'd tumbled across three boys in the rain, and gone home with one. Some days she wondered how things would've been different if she'd gone home with Dustin or Lucas. Or even worse, if they hadn't found her at all.

But they *had* found her; more importantly, *Mike* had found her. And she felt her life truly began at the moment they'd locked eyes on that rainy night.

So why, she asked herself, *Did you let him go?*

She knew why, of course. She thought she'd been making the best decision for the both of them. But as time went on, she saw it as a selfish act on her part, and she hated herself for it.

Over the last year it had felt like a part of her were missing. And despite her busy schedule-working at Melvald's four days a week while helping with her mother the other three-she had felt..empty. And while she did miss her friends, and was beyond ecstatic when they'd come to visit, it was when Mike came to Hawkins that she felt complete. Even when they weren't speaking to each other, a part of her felt better, felt *safe* when he was there.

"I don't know how to explain it, Max," she'd told her friend over the phone in May.

"You miss him, El. Simple as that."

"I do."

"So talk to him, see if he wants to get back together."

"I can't do that," she'd said, shaking her head. "He's so mad at me. I don't...I don't think he'd want me back."

"He's not mad anymore, right? You said the last time you guys talked it was okay."

"Yeah, it was, but...I think we're stuck as friends."

"You'll never know unless you ask. Besides, Lucas...never mind."

"Lucas what?"

Sighing, Max had said, "I was talking to Lucas a couple of weeks ago, he went and visited Mike during spring break. He said he can tell he misses you."

“He said that?”

“Who, Mike? No, but....Lucas said he felt it. He still has pictures of you in his apartment, apparently.”

“He does?”

“El, you guys were friends for, like, five years, and in love the whole time. I don’t know if you get over something like that so quickly.”

That conversation had opened the door. *Maybe he does miss me*, she’d thought to herself. And she didn’t think he was mad anymore.

When he’d come home for Thanksgiving, hot off the break up, he’d been short with her. She had tried to find a friendly medium, but apparently he wasn’t having it.

At Christmas, *she* had been the one with the attitude, after he’d been so dismissive towards her the month prior.

Then in January things had gotten better. She’d called him, wondering if she’d left a shirt of hers in Boston. They’d talked for a few minutes while he searched his apartment, him telling her about school and she talking about the happenings in Hawkins. They’d even laughed. He’d found the shirt and mailed it back, and she’d been happy that it had carried his scent with it back home.

When he came home in February for a break, she had made a point to see him, and things were almost back to normal. That opened the door even wider.

So when Joyce told her that Jonathan and Nancy were getting married at the end of the summer, and that the boys would be flying in for it, she had made up her mind:

She was going to get him back.

She knew it wasn’t going to be easy. Yes, things were “normal” between them now, but she knew there was a big difference between “normal” and being in love again.

She originally didn’t know how to start, but a trip up to the cabin one

day gave her an idea. When she'd seen the glow in the dark stars on the ceiling of her old room, she'd remembered the conversation they'd had, years ago, about a telescope.

So she'd found one at a thrift store, but on her way to the Wheeler's home that first day, she kept thinking it was a stupid idea. *What if he doesn't remember? What if he hates it?*

When she'd arrived, she told Mrs. Wheeler about it, but had then half considered changing her mind. *It's a stupid idea*, she'd thought again. *There's nothing between us anymore*.

But then she'd gone down the stairs into the basement, and she'd locked eyes with Mike while she hugged Lucas. And the way she'd felt when their eyes met, even if it had been for just a fleeting moment, made her decide that she had to at least give it a try. She felt whole again, knowing he was there.

She knew she missed him, and that she loved him, still. But did he feel the same?

That's what she intended to find out today. Pulling on her clothes, she decided to go over to see Mike and put it all on the line. The way he'd kissed her back last night had made her see that at least some part of him wanted her back, too.

She had a quick breakfast of Eggo waffles, then made the drive over to the Wheelers. As she walked to the front door, she felt butterflies take up space in her stomach as more "what if's" flew through her mind. After knocking, she took a deep breath as she prepared herself.

Holly Wheeler opened the door, and gave her a big smile. "Hi, El!"

"Hi, Holly. Is Mike home?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, "He went to give Will back his car. But he should be back soon. Do you want to wait?"

"Um..." she thought about it, but decided against it. "No thanks. Tell him I came by, though, okay?"

“ ‘kay,” Holly said, nodding.

Walking back to her car, El frowned. Maybe she should’ve waited. She wanted some time alone to talk with him. The group was coming over this afternoon in order to play Dungeons & Dragons, and she didn’t want a crowd around when they talked.

Not sure of what to do, she decided she’d go see Max.

After taking the car back to the Byers, Will had asked Mike if he wanted to go and get breakfast, so the two headed to a downtown diner to get something to eat. They called Dustin from Will’s home, and he agreed to meet them there. The car ride was full of talk about the wedding, as well as the campaign they’d be playing later with the rest of the party.

After they parked, Mike and Will entered the diner and found a booth near the front to sit in.

“What happened with you and Joanna?” Mike asked his friend.

Will grinned, but kept his eyes on his menu. “Nothing happened. We just talked.”

“Talked?”

“Yeah, talked. She’s really cool.”

“Uh-huh. So that’s it?”

Will shrugged. “We may have kissed...”

Mike smiled. “I *knew* it.”

“But that was all, I swear,” Will said. “Besides, you were probably making out with El,” he added jokingly. When Mike didn’t respond, Will put his menu down and looked at Mike, wide eyed. “Wait, did you?”

Mike knew he was blushing. He'd wanted to get Will's take on what had happened, but was afraid to bring it up.

"What happened?" Will asked.

The bell on the door rang, and they looked up to see Dustin make his way in. Plopping down next to Will, he asked, "And how are you fine gentlemen this morning?"

"Did you call Lucas?" Will asked.

"Wow. No 'Hi, Dustin?' No 'How are you, Dustin'? Straight to Lucas, huh? His mom said he wasn't there." Dustin looked to the two. "What's going on?"

Will looked across the table at Mike. "Uh..."

Mike put his own menu down as he let out a sigh. He'd really only wanted to tell Will, but decided it (hopefully) wouldn't hurt to get both of their opinions. "El kissed me last night."

"Whoa!" Dustin exclaimed.

"No *shit*? " Will whispered. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Mike responded, nodding. "Seriously. And...and I kissed her back, and now I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

"Well, why'd you..." Will paused, as a waitress came and took their drink orders. Once she left, he continued, asking, "Why'd you kiss her back? I thought you said you didn't want to get back with her."

"I don't," Mike said, but he didn't know if he believed that anymore. "I mean...I don't *think* I do."

"Then why'd you kiss her?" Dustin asked.

"I...I don't know."

Will grinned. "Yeah you do." Mike looked confused, and Will rolled his eyes. "Mike, you obviously still like her. And now I'm thinking Dustin was right."

“Right about what?” asked Dustin.

“Remember, at the bachelor party, you said El was trying to get back with him? I think what happened last night proves it.”

“Definitely,” Dustin said, grinning.

Mike shook his head. “No, that doesn’t mean...”

“Mike,” Will said, interrupting him. “Just stop, okay.”

“Stop what?”

“You keep acting like everything is normal between you and El, but it’s not. There is obviously something unfinished between you guys. You know it, I know it. Even Jonathan’s said something. So just stop lying to yourself.”

“I’m not....” Mike began, but stopped when Will shot him a look. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Talk to her. Because she’s probably wondering what you’re thinking right now.” Will shook his head. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom, I’ll be right back.”

Mike leaned back into the booth, resting his head on the cushion. Dustin gave him a glance, then picked up his menu. “You’ve been quiet,” Mike said. “You don’t have anything else to say?”

Dustin shrugged. “I mean, Will’s right. Even though you don’t come out and say it, it’s pretty obvious you still like her, Mike. And she definitely likes you. So, you know...take care of business.”

Mike sighed. Since he’d dropped El off last night, all he could think about was their kiss. How good it felt to have her in his arms again. The way their mouths just fit together.

He had barely slept last night as he had thought about what Will had just said. Was this all some big attempt by El to get back him back? Did he want her back?

If someone had asked him a week ago, he would’ve said no with

probably 80% assuredness. But last night, after feeling her lips on his, and her arms go around his neck, and as he had inhaled her familiar scent...

Now? Now he was probably at 25%.

He had missed her, big time over this past year. He had been in love with El before he'd really known what being in love meant. They had a history together, and a connection that would probably never be broken. Last night's kiss had reignited all of the old feelings he'd had, or had tried to bury, over the last few months. He knew without a doubt that there was still a part of him that was in love with El, that would probably always *be* in love with her.

But then he thought back to how he felt when they'd broken up. How empty he'd felt, and how *hurt* he was by her actions-namely her decision to end it. He had been so mad at her.

He didn't want to feel that way again; he couldn't *go* through that again. As nice as last night's kiss was, maybe, he thought, maybe it was what they'd needed to close the book on them.

Maybe it was a mistake.

As Will emerged from the bathroom and walked back to the table, Mike decided that as much as he still loved El, and as much as part of him indeed wanted her back, he had to tell her that they were done. That last night's kiss was a fluke.

He didn't like it, but he felt it was what was best for both of them.

El wasn't too surprised when, on the way to the Mayfield home, she saw Lucas's rental car parked a few houses away. She herself parked in the Mayfield's driveway, and went up to the door.

Max's mom was the one who let El in, and she frowned as she closed the door. "Max isn't up yet," she said. "Let me go wake her for you."

“That’s okay,” El said. “I’ll do it.”

El trekked to Max’s door, and knocked lightly on it. “Max?” she whispered. “It’s El. Are you up?”

She heard a heavy thud, then two people whispering. After a moment, the door opened a crack and Max’s blue eyes were wide as she looked at El. “Hey.”

“Hey. Can I come in?”

“Um....” Max’s eyes darted to her left, then back to El.

“Max, I know Lucas is in there,” El said softly. “I’m not going to say anything. Just let me in.”

Max rolled her eyes, and moved so El could enter. Lucas was standing behind the door in just his pants, a scared look on his face.

“Calm down, stalker,” Max whispered to him.

“How’d you know I was here?” Lucas whispered to El.

“I saw your car down the street,” she shrugged.

“Crap.” He tossed his shirt on, and grabbed his suit jacket from the floor.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” Max told him. Turning to El, she said, “Be right back.”

She and Lucas left the room, leaving El to sit on Max’s bed. She heard the front door close, and Max said something to her mother, before she came back in her bedroom. Closing the door behind her, the redhead let out a breath. “Well, *that* was awkward.”

“So, are you two...”

“Kind of,” Max said, sitting next to El. “It’s...complicated.”

“Uh huh,” El nodded. Sighing, she said, “I kissed Mike.”

“Whoa, *what* ?” Max said.

"It happened last night. He dropped me off, and...we kissed."

"That is awesome! So are you guys back together now, or..."

"I don't know *what* we are," El said, putting her head in her hands. "I don't know how he feels."

"Well, did he kiss you back?"

"Yeah..."

"Then you know how he feels."

El shook her head. "I went to his house to talk to him this morning, but he wasn't there."

"Well, you're going to that D & D thing, right?"

"Yeah... aren't you?"

Max rolled her eyes. "My mom wants to do something. I can't imagine how weird it's going to be now that she knew Lucas spent the night." Looking back at El, she said, "Just talk to him during a break in the game or something."

El sighed, and lay on her back on the bed. Max copied her, laying next to her. "What do *you* want, El?" Max asked.

El looked to her friend. "I want him back."

"So go tell him that, knucklehead. He probably feels the same way. You two need to stop dancing around this....thing between you and get it out in the open. I swear, it's like you're in middle school all over again."

"Says the girl who just tried to sneak a boy out of her room," El added with a smile.

"Hey, I might still be in high school, but you and Mike? You're middle school all the way."

El chuckled.

After getting breakfast Mike, Will, and Dustin went back to Mike's to relax until the campaign began. Mike set up the game table while his friends talked on the couch. He was a little sad that tomorrow he'd be leaving, and didn't know when he'd be seeing them again. Last year only Dustin had come home for Thanksgiving; Max had it with her dad in California, while Lucas had stayed out west as well. Will's had been with Jonathan and Nancy in New York. So Christmas might be the next time when they were all home again.

And El. After he talked to her today, he didn't know if they'd *ever* see each other again. Would she even want to talk to him anymore? Would this be the end of their friendship? He hoped not, but he couldn't help but dwell on that possibility.

By mid afternoon Lucas showed up, and the group sat in the basement chatting for a little while, talking about school, their parents, and the wedding. The newlywed couple were staying at Joyce's house for the time being.

"So you're going to have to find a place of your own, huh?" Lucas asked Will. The two Byers boys were renting a place together in New York.

Will shrugged. "Honestly, we haven't really talked about it, yet. Nancy's been pretty much living with us the past year. I mean, technically she has her own apartment, but she's over at our place most days of the week."

"Well, you gotta move out," Dustin said. "Newlyweds, man. They want their privacy so they can...y'know."

"Dude, that's my *sister*," Mike said.

"And that's my brother," Will said, making a face.

"Oh, like you haven't heard them before?" Lucas asked Will.

"Can we talk about something else, now?" Mike asked. Glancing at

the stairs, he asked Lucas, "Where were you this morning?"

"Huh?"

"I called you," Dustin said, "This morning when we went to get breakfast. Where were you?"

"I was out," Lucas answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Out where? Your mom said she didn't think you came home."

"When did this turn into the whereabouts of my location? Aren't we supposed to be playing a campaign?"

"Nice deflect," Dustin said. "Do you know if Max is coming?"

Lucas shook his head. "I don't think so. She said last night she and her mom were doing something." Looking to Mike, he asked, "What about El? Is she gonna play?"

Mike shrugged. "She said she'd come and watch." He glanced at Dustin and Will, who both had knowing looks on their faces but thankfully hadn't told Lucas about his dalliance with El. "You guys want to start?" he asked. When they all agreed, the group sat around the game table.

It was just like old times. Mike forgot how much fun he had being the dungeon master, as well as the various looks he'd get from his friends while playing. He had a small group of friends in Massachusetts (who were also nerds), but they didn't like to play D & D. But today, seeing the joy on his friend's faces, and hearing them whoop in excitement at a particular happening, he felt himself forget about the drama going on with El as he lost himself in the game.

Until Holly came downstairs.

The boys had been playing for an hour when the youngest of the Wheelers came downstairs.

"Mom wants to know if you guys want dinner," she told her brother.

“No,” Mike said, shaking his head. “We were gonna order pizza.”

“Okay. Oh! El came over.”

Mike looked up from his book. “She did? When?”

Holly shrugged. “This morning, when you were gone. She said she was gonna come back.”

Mike nodded, as Will and Dustin gave him a look. Holly went back upstairs, and the game picked back up.

About a half an hour later, they paused the game. Mike called for a pizza, while Dustin and Will went to use the bathroom. When Mike got off the phone, he looked up to see El coming down the stairs.

Their eyes meeting, neither one spoke until Lucas greeted her.

“What took you so long?” Lucas asked her.

“I was talking to Max,” she said, giving a knowing glance at Lucas. He looked away.

Turning to Mike, she said, “Hey.”

“Hey.”

They both turned as Will came down the stairs, and El moved to the side as he got to the bottom. Will looked at both Mike and El. “Uh...”

“Alright, whose turn is it?” Dustin called as he came out of the bathroom. His eyes widened slightly when he saw that El was there. “Hey.”

“Yeah, let’s get back to the game,” Lucas said, oblivious to why his friends were giving each other looks.

The party sat back around the table, with El taking a spot next to Mike. Every now and then the two would glance at each other, but would look away quickly.

The game went on for a bit more, until they heard the doorbell ring.

Stopping the game, Mike glanced upward. "That's probably the pizza," he said. "Be right back."

Getting up, he climbed the stairs and, after answering the door, paid for the two pizzas he'd ordered. His parents were both upstairs, and Holly sat in front of the television.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Mike called down, "Guys! Pizza!"

Next came their thundering steps as the group made their way into the kitchen, with El bringing up the rear. She paused, while the boys went to the two pizza boxes.

"Mike?" she called. When he looked up, she asked, "Can we...talk?"

Mike hesitated, but nodded his head. "Yeah. Uh, let's go back downstairs, okay?"

She nodded in agreement, and as the two went downstairs, he heard Lucas ask, "Why're they going down there to talk?"

"Beats me..." came Will's answer.

Mike had closed the door behind them, and when he made his way downstairs, El was nervously pacing, wringing her hands. She stopped as he got to the bottom step, and the two looked at each other.

Smiling, El said, "Hey."

He smiled back. "Hey."

She looked down at the ground, as she took slow steps towards him. "About last night..."

"El," he said, interrupting, "I wanted..."

"Can...can I speak first?" she asked, looking up.

He nodded. "Of course."

She smiled. "Thanks. Mike," she said, stepping closer to him, "I made a mistake, breaking up with you."

He was taken aback, and started to say something, but she continued. "I thought...I thought I was doing the adult thing, you know? I thought I was holding you back...and maybe I was, but..." She paused, her eyes locked with his. "I've missed you. *So . Much .* And...I'm still in love with you, Mike. And...and I think you're still in love with me, too. Can we just...can we try again? Please?"

He looked back at her, flabbergasted. He wasn't expecting all of *that*. Her eyes bore into his, pleading.

"I..." he began, "What about your mom?"

She shook her head, looking down. "The hospice can take better care of her than I ever could." Looking at him, she asked, "Am I a bad person? For putting her there?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "El, you couldn't be a bad person if you tried. I think you're just...ready to live your life."

She smiled. "I am."

Sighing, he said, "El, I..." and despite what his better judgement was telling him, he said, "I've missed you, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Of course I missed you, El. And...and yeah, I still love you..."

He watched her face light up as he thought of his choices. Everything in his body and mind was telling him to end his sentence right there. But he kept thinking of how broken he'd felt when they broke up, and how hard it was to move on. Could he really go through that again?

"But..." he said.

And her face started to fall.

"I, uh..." he wasn't able to meet her eyes. "I don't know if right now's the time to get back together. Maybe...maybe we should just stay friends for now, you know?"

Finally looking at her, he saw heartbreak in her eyes as she scanned his face. Finally, she muttered, "Oh. Um...okay."

She turned her gaze away quickly, and he saw her discreetly wipe at her eyes, something he wished he hadn't seen.

"El..."

"No, it's okay," she said, nodding her head. "I, um...I'll see you around, alright?" She gave him a weak smile, and climbed up the stairs.

Mike watched her go, and wondered if he'd done the right thing.

"It's not going to work, is it?"

Mike, whose hand was on the door handle, paused as he turned to El.
"What?"

They'd just arrived at the train station after their weekend together. They'd made small talk on the drive, but as they'd gotten closer, El had gotten quiet. Now, just as they were about to get out of the car, she'd spoken up.

"Us," she continued. He could see tears building at the corners of her eyes.

"What're you talking about, El? What's wrong?" He turned his body so he was facing her.

Shaking her head, she said, "You have a life here, Mike. It...it isn't fair to make you wait for me."

"I don't understand, El. Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

She sniffled, looking away. "It isn't all of a sudden. It's just...my mom, I don't know how long she's going to need me, and you...I don't want to

hold you back. I don't want you to have to wait for me."

"El," he said, chuckling lightly, "I waited 353 days for you. I can wait a little longer, if I need to."

She shook her head. "No. I...I don't want you to." She sniffled again, and turned to look at him. "It isn't fair to you."

"What do you think you're holding me back from, exactly?"

She shrugged. "Living your life."

*"El, you *are* my life, can't you see that?"*

She shook her head again, sighing. He tilted her chin, and brought her eyes to his. "I love you," he told her.

She smiled weakly at him. "I love you, too. That's why I think...maybe we should..."

"What, break up?" he asked, alarmed.

She nodded, pulling her head away and looking at her lap. "Or maybe...take a break."

"Don't I get a say in this?" he asked. "El...why're you giving up on us all of a sudden?"

"It isn't all of a sudden," she mumbled. "I've been...thinking about it. I don't want you to feel like you have to wait for me."

"El..."

She leaned over, and kissed him. As he went to put his hands on her cheeks, though, she pulled away, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. Goodbye, Mike," she said. She grabbed her bag from the back, and with one last look at him, climbed out of the car.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading. Sorry this chapter was kind of a downer; I dreaded writing it (well, at least the

end). But in order to get the story where I want it to go/end, I had to do it. Next chapter hopefully will be up by this weekend. Let me know what you thought in the comments...

5. Us

January, 1990

The ringing phone woke Mike up. Turning to his side, he glanced at his bedside clock, and saw that it was still early (at least for a weekend), almost 10:30.

Climbing out of bed, he hoped it wasn't John, telling him he had to come in to work today. It was rare that Mike had a Saturday off, and he was planning on making the most of it (the "most" being watching all three Star Wars films, playing some video games, and maybe catching a bite to eat later with friends).

Finally getting to the phone, he crossed his fingers, hoping it was someone other than his boss.

"Hello?" he said into the receiver.

There was a pause, then an all too familiar voice said "Hi, Mike."

And Mike felt himself tense up. Out of all the people who could've called him this morning, she-El-was not in his top five.

"Uh...hey, El. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's...everything's fine. Um...how are you?"

"I'm, uh...I'm doing alright," he said, partially lying. "How about you?"

"I'm good," she answered. "I don't know why I called, I thought you'd be at work..." she trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

"I got lucky," he said. "It's one of the few Saturdays I'm off."

"Well, good for you."

He smiled, then, realizing he was doing it, forced it away. "So, uh...why did you call?"

"I...I think I left a shirt of mine at your apartment. It's, uh...a Star Wars shirt. Have you seen it?"

"Oh, uh...let me check."

He knew what shirt she was talking about, of course. It was a black tee with a TIE Fighter in a yellow circle, the STAR WARS logo emblazoned above it. He knew what shirt she meant because he'd got it for her as a gift three years ago.

He also knew what shirt it was because he'd been keeping it in his room. He'd found it that day he'd returned from the train station; lying crumpled up on the floor, no doubt left behind due to El rushing to pack that day.

He had originally planned on sending it back to her, or bringing it with him to Hawkins during the holidays, but....

The shirt was too sentimental to him. He remembered buying it at Sears for her, when they went to see a midnight showing of The Empire Strikes Back at The Hawk.

He remembered how, after their first time being intimate with one another, it was the shirt she'd slipped on after as she lay snuggled with him in his bed.

He remembered their last night together here, in his apartment, how she'd worn it to sleep.

He remembered the first few days after she'd left, how he would look at it, hold it, and relive memories they'd had together. By December, though, he had discarded it into a corner of his bedroom, left alone until he had a sudden craving to pick it back up and inhale the fading smell of her perfume on it.

Yes, he was slowly getting over her sudden end to their relationship. But for some reason that he couldn't fathom, he couldn't let go of this shirt.

Until now.

Leaving the phone on the counter, he found it underneath a pile of his own clothes. He shook it, causing small dust bunnies to fall off, then carried it back to the phone.

"Found it," he said into the receiver.

"Oh, good," she said. "Thanks, Mike."

"Yeah, no problem. I'll..." he began.

"How're..." she said.

They both stopped, him smiling and hearing a soft giggle from El's end. "Go ahead," he told her.

"I was just going to say, how're things going in school?" she asked.

"Oh. Uh...good, I guess. I've got a couple different classes this semester. The professors seem nice so far."

"How's the homework?"

"Nothing I can't handle," he answered, shrugging. "Couple of papers that I'm trying to put off writing."

He heard her breathe a smile into the phone. "Just like with Mrs. Smith, huh?"

He stifled a laugh as he recounted that memory. In junior year, they'd been given a group project in history. Max and El did the presentation, and all Mike had to do was write the paper.

Only Mike kept procrastinating, and the day before the assignment was due he spent all night writing it, and was so sleep-deprived the next day that he'd turned the paper into the wrong teacher, who'd thrown it away after class.

"Never gonna let me forget that, huh?" he joked.

"I'm kidding," she said.

"Yeah, I know. Remember how angry Max got?"

She giggled. "She really earned her nickname, 'Mad Max'."

They were quiet for a moment, until he asked, "How're things in Hawkins?"

"Uh, well, you know...same old, same old. Joyce might be getting promoted to assistant manager. They had to cancel the winter carnival because it got too cold. But besides that, nothing's really happened."

He grinned. "Yeah, same old Hawkins." After another pause, he said, "Well, um...I'll get this shirt back to you, El. I'll put it in the mail this afternoon."

"Thanks, Mike."

"No problem. I guess I'll talk to you later."

"Okay."

"Bye." He went to hang up, but before he did, he could hear her saying his name. Putting the receiver back to his ear, he asked, "Yeah?"

She paused, then said "I'm glad I got to talk to you. I'm...I'm glad you weren't at work."

He smiled. "Me too, El. It was good talking to you again."

"You too. Bye."

"Bye." Hanging up, he felt himself smile.

August 13, 1990

Mike slowly went up the stairs, going over what'd just happened with Eleven. *Had he really just turned her down?*

It's for the best, he thought. But that hadn't made him feel any better when she'd left a moment ago, wiping at her eyes.

As he reached the kitchen, he could hear the front door close; El leaving, no doubt. His friends-Will, Dustin, and Lucas-sat gathered at the table, pizza in front of them and looks of confusion on their faces.

"What just happened?" Will asked.

“Yeah, why was El so upset?” Lucas said.

Mike didn’t say anything at first, instead grabbing a slice of pizza and a paper plate. His friends watched as he sat down with them before answering. “She wanted to get back together.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Lucas said, putting his hands up. “She *what* ?”

“El. She asked me if we could get back together.”

“Are you guys hearing this?” Lucas asked Will and Dustin, surprised by their lack of reaction.

Will shrugged. “We kind of already knew.”

“Yeah, I mean, they kissed last night,” Dustin said. “So...”

“You *kissed* ?” Lucas asked as he turned to Mike, his voice getting louder.

“Shut up, will you? Jeez,” Mike told him. “Yeah, we kissed.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just told *them* at breakfast,” Mike answered, nodding at Will and Dustin.

“And you said no?” Will asked.

Mike nodded, picking at his pizza. “Yeah.”

“What are you, an idiot?” Lucas asked, causing Mike to look up.

“What?”

“You told her no? You kiss her last night, you guys pretty much eye-hump each other whenever you’re in the same room...and you told her no?”

“Lucas, you don’t understand...”

“No, he’s right,” Dustin said, surprising Mike. Continuing, he said, “I don’t know about the eye humping part, but...you just said this

morning that you wanted to get back with her, didn't you?"

"No," Mike said, shaking his head. "I said I didn't *know* if I wanted to get back with her."

"Okay, well...you know what I mean. Why'd you make up your mind all of a sudden? Did you at least *talk* to her?"

"Not really, no," Mike said, shrugging.

"What'd you say?" Will asked.

"I just...I told her I just wanted to be friends right now."

Dustin and Lucas shook their heads, causing Mike to frown.

"What?" he asked.

"She practically threw herself at you this weekend," Lucas said.

"And ever since you two broke up, you've been...I don't know, quieter?" Dustin said. Looking to his friends, he asked, "Is that the right word?" When they didn't say anything, he looked back to Mike. "I thought you'd want her back."

Mike shook his head. "I mean, I kinda do, but...you have no idea how bad it was when she broke up with me."

"I thought you said it was mutual."

"I lied, okay? She broke up with me. At the stupid train station, of all places. She just...blindsided me. Out of nowhere."

"Yeah, but still..." Lucas began

"No, I get it," Will said, interrupting him. The boys all turned to him. "I get it," he continued. "I mean...think about it. Remember at Christmas, how they barely talked to each other?"

"Yeah," Lucas said.

"And remember how mad Mike was? I mean...what if they got back together, then broke up again?"

“Yeah, but what if they *didn’t*, is what I’m saying,” Lucas said. “I mean, me and Max...” He stopped, eyes widening at what he almost revealed.

“You and Max what?” Dustin asked.

“Nothing,” Lucas said, looking at the placemat in front of him.

Will rolled his eyes, and looked at Mike. “You’re trying to save yourself, right? In case it happens again.”

Mike shrugged. “I mean...I guess.”

“Wait, I thought you wanted them to get back together,” Dustin said to Will.

Will shrugged, as he glanced at Mike. “No, I just wanted them to talk, is all.”

Mike considered Will’s point. One of the things that had bothered him when he and El broke up was the fact that he didn’t get more of an explanation from her. He figured the least he could do was tell her why he’d turned her down.

“Alright, I’ll talk to her,” he said.

That seemed to satisfy his friends, and soon after they returned to the basement to finish their game. Although they all had a good time, it wasn’t the same, as they felt a blow had been dealt to the party. The game finished around nine-thirty, and the boys began gathering their things, though no one was in a rush to leave.

“What time does your plane leave tomorrow?” Lucas asked Mike. “You need a ride?”

“It doesn’t leave until six, I think,” Mike answered. “I’ll let you know about the ride. When are you going back?”

“Friday,” he answered.

“Going back with Max, are you?” asked Dustin.

Lucas gave him a look. “I don’t know when she’s going back.”

“We should try to meet together, tomorrow,” Will said. “Assuming Mike fixes things with El.”

This time Mike gave him a look.

“Breakfast again?” Dustin suggested.

“No,” Mike said, shaking his head. “Nancy’s coming over tomorrow morning, and my mom’s been making a big deal about family meals.”

“Well, maybe lunch before you go or something,” said Will.

“We could do that.”

“Cool. Lucas, you can talk to Max. Mike? When you talk to El, maybe mention it?”

Mike nodded, uncertain. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Alright, then,” Dustin said, standing. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“I’m going, too,” Lucas said, getting up. He punched Mike’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow.” Turning to Will, he asked, “Are you coming?”

Shaking his head, Will answered “No, I’ll see you guys tomorrow, alright?”

The other boys nodded and went up. Turning to Mike, Will asked, “Are you sure you made the right choice?”

Mike chuckled. “No. I don’t know. It’s like...part of me does want her back, you know? But...I’m afraid of what could happen.”

“How exactly did you break up?”

Mike sighed, and recounted the events from last October. Just retelling it brought back a lot of the anger and frustration he’d felt during that time.

“Wow,” Will said when he finished. “That must’ve sucked.”

“Yeah, it did,” Mike said.

“Why didn’t you tell any of us?”

Mike shook his head. “It was embarrassing. It was easier just to say we had a fight or whatever.”

Will nodded. “Well, I don’t blame you. But honestly? I’m not that surprised you still kind of want to get back with her.”

“You’re not?”

“Mike, you and El were together forever. We all had bets on when you two would end up getting married.”

“You *did* ?”

“Yeah,” Will said, chuckling. “Lucas already lost, he said it’d be right out of high school. Max bet by the end of next year.”

“What about you?”

Will sighed. “When you graduated from college.”

Mike snorted, laughing. “And Dustin?”

Shaking his head, Will answered “He was ridiculous. He said you’d both get drunk on your 21st birthday and go to Vegas and get married there.”

Mike snorted again as both boys laughed.

Standing, Will said, “I’m gonna go. But you should call her, Mike. She’s probably going through some of the same stuff you are.”

Mike nodded. “Alright.”

After Will left, Mike finished cleaning up in the basement, then decided to make the call. The kitchen was dark now, with the rest of

the family upstairs. Mike picked up the phone, and dialed a number he'd long remembered but hadn't dialed in forever. He was reminded of the numerous hours he'd spend standing in the kitchen, talking with El as his mother worked around him, chiding him with *You just saw her!* And when that failed, they'd resort to the Supercomm, talking into the night until their batteries were drained.

After three rings, he heard the gruff voice of Hopper pick up. "Yeah?"

"Hi, Chief. Is El there? It's Mike Wheeler."

"Yeah, I recognize you, Mike. How're things up in Boston?"

"Uh...pretty good."

"Mm. Hold on, let me go get her."

There was a thunk as the phone was put down, and he could hear Hopper calling El's name. He heard some more dialogue, far away, before Hopper came back on. "She says she's busy right now. Want me to take a message?"

"Um...could you just ask her to call me back when she can? Or, if it gets too late, tell her to use the Supercomm."

"The what?"

"The walkie talkie, if she still has it."

"Oh. Alright."

"Even if it's late, tell her she can still call me, okay? I'll be up."

There was a pause, then Hopper said, "Alright. I'll tell her. You take care, Mike."

"Thanks, Chief. You too."

They hung up, and Mike wondered if she'd ever call back. Was she busy? Or did she just not want to talk to him?

He climbed the stairs up to his room. The door to his parent's

bedroom was closed, but Holly's door was cracked, and he peeked in. His sister sat on her bed, all of her attention on something in her lap that he couldn't see.

He knocked, and she looked up, surprised.

"Hey," he said. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding as he entered. As he stepped in the room, he saw that she was looking at a photo album. She scooted over a bit, and he sat next to her. "What is that?"

"It's from mom and dad's wedding," she said.

Mike grinned. "I haven't looked at this in years. Where'd you find it?"

"In their room," she said, her eyes never leaving the plastic pages.

They both spent the next few minutes looking at pictures, with Mike pointing out relatives Holly didn't recognize, while they both laughed at the hairdos of days past.

"They look so happy," Holly commented after a while, talking about their parents.

"Yeah, they do," Mike agreed.

"Do you think you'll ever get married?" she asked, lifting her gaze from the book.

Mike hesitated before answering. He had, until about a year ago, always figured he would marry El. But now...

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe."

She turned a few more pages quietly until she asked "Are you and Eleven friends anymore?"

"Yeah, we're still friends. Why?"

"Because she left here crying," she said.

"Oh." Mike felt a pang of guilt. "That's...we're just...it's adult stuff."

Holly rolled her eyes, closing the photo album. "You sound like mom." Climbing into her bed, she added "I don't think I'll ever get married."

He was surprised. "Why not?"

"I like having my own bed," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "And besides...I'd have to kiss a boy. Ew."

Mike started laughing, surprised by his sister's honesty. "Those are pretty good reasons," he finally admitted. Shaking his head, he added, "But one day, I think you might change your mind."

She shook her head. "Nuh-unh."

"You don't like boys yet, just wait till you get older, Holly."

Yawning, she added, "Now you sound like El."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"She said she didn't know *she* liked boys until she met you."

He blushed, as he scooped up the album. "Is that so?"

She smiled, as he got up. "You're leaving tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "But I'll be back."

"Good," she said, yawning. "It's fun when you're here."

"I think so, too," he said, clicking off her light. "Goodnight, Hol."

"Goodnight, Mike," she said softly.

A few miles away, El sat on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

She felt like an idiot. *Why did you think Mike would take you back?* The telescope, the dance, the kiss...it'd all been for nothing.

Still, there was a part of her that still had hope. The kiss had *meant* something, she just knew it. But his words a few hours ago still played on a loop in her mind.

Maybe we're better off as friends.

Could she be friends with him? Could she push down all of the feelings that'd been brought back to the surface during these last few days?

She could, she knew. But she didn't want to.

She also knew that she couldn't show her face around him. She was upset at Mike's decision, but she was more embarrassed than anything else.

She was so lost in thought that she almost didn't see Hopper, standing in her doorway. She glanced over at him, and considered closing the door with a flick of her head.

"So this is you being busy, huh?" he asked.

She sighed, and looked back at the ceiling.

"You want to talk about it?"

She shook her head, her eyes still looking above her. "No."

"Alright, then." He turned. "I'm going to bed." Over his shoulder, he added "Mike said you could call him on your walkie, if you want to. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she mumbled. After she heard his footsteps recede, she jerked her head, closing the door.

MikeMikeMikeMikeMike ...

Were they better off as friends? As upset and embarrassed as she felt at the moment, part of her thought he could be right. She couldn't picture a life without Mike there. Maybe they could be friends.

She sighed, shaking her head. No. She loved him; she was *in* love

with him. And he had kissed her back, she hadn't imagined that. And he'd said he loved her, too. If only they could sit down and talk...

But as much as that would help, she wasn't ready. His words had deflated her; she needed time to work through all of her conflicting feelings.

As she continued debating, looking at the ceiling above her, she heard her Supercomm, buried somewhere in the room, come to life as Mike's voice said her name: "El? You there? It's me, it's Mike."

She raised her head, and spotted the walkie on her desk. Concentrating, she made it float into her hand, cradling it as she listened.

"You don't have to say anything," he continued, "But...we're all meeting tomorrow, for lunch or something. And we...I mean *I* ...wanted to know if you wanted to come."

Hesitantly, she raised the walkie to her lips. "I'm here, Mike," she said softly.

"Oh. Hey, El," he responded, sounding relieved. "Uh..are you okay?"

She sighed once more, then responded, "Yeah. I'm okay."

There was a pause, until he said, "Look, about what I said..."

"Um..." she said, cutting him off, "Can we talk about that later?"

"Yeah, sure," he responded. "Um...but we're going to meet up tomorrow, I'm not sure where yet. I was hoping you'd come."

"Okay," she answered back.

"Cool. Uh, I'll let you know where we're going, alright? Tomorrow morning?"

"Okay," she said again.

Another pause, then he said "Well, okay. Goodnight, El."

“Goodnight, Mike,” she said, turning the walkie off. Putting it on the bed next to her, she let out a sigh. Tomorrow was his last day; possibly her last chance to try, once more, to reconcile with him. But was his mind already made up? Were they forever meant to be friends?

She refused to believe that. She thought about the drop off last night, and the way he’d held her close as their lips came together. How good it felt to be in his arms again.

She didn’t want to just be friends with him. But as much as she wanted that, she still didn’t know if she was ready to talk to him.

If only they had more time...

She closed her eyes, hoping that a good night’s rest would clear her mind.

The next morning the Wheeler breakfast table was crowded as Nancy and her new husband, Jonathan, joined the rest of the family for their meal.

This time, Mike noticed, Nancy wasn’t holding back; her plate was full of their mom’s scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, as well as a pair of Eggo waffles.

As Mike sat with his own plate, Holly slid over the syrup, already knowing what he was going to do. Smiling, he did his usual routine, and poured a splash of syrup onto his eggs.

Across from him, Nancy made a face as she asked, “Jonathan, have you ever tried that?”

“Tried what?”

She nodded at Mike’s plate. “Mike pours syrup on his eggs.”

“Why would you do that?” Jonathan asked, making a face.

"It's good," Mike said, shrugging. "Want to try?"

"No, I'm fine," Jonathan said with a grin.

"So, how's newlywed life treating you?" Karen Wheeler asked the two.

Nancy and Jonathan glanced at each other, and smiled. "It's great," Nancy answered, blushing.

"When are you two going back to New York?" Ted Wheeler asked.

"Not for another couple of weeks," Jonathan said. "My mom's not letting us go so quickly."

"Do you guys have a place?" Mike asked.

"We're staying at Jonathan's...I mean, *our* place," Nancy said, grinning. "At least for another couple of months."

"Yeah, then either we'll find somewhere else, or Will might have to," Jonathan said.

"You're kicking him out?" Mike asked.

"Mike, we're married now," Nancy said.

"Would you kick *me* out, if I were living with you?"

"In a heartbeat," she said with a wink.

"Guys, please," Karen said. "This is going to be our last..."

"*Mom!*" Mike and Nancy said at the same time.

"Alright, alright," their mother said, holding up her hands in defeat.

The conversation turned to Jonathan and Nancy's honeymoon at Niagara Falls at the end of the month. As Mike listened, he couldn't help but admire how obvious it was the two loved each other. Either by the hand holding they were doing under the table, or the way Jonathan would smile at Nancy and she'd blush, the two just seemed to radiate love.

It made Mike realize how badly *he* wanted that. But the only person he ever saw that future with was El.

El, the girl who'd broken his heart almost a year ago.

El, the girl he was also still in love with.

El, the girl who'd asked for another chance last night.

El, the only girl he'd ever loved.

Would he be a fool to take her back? He knew of people who repeatedly broke up, only to get back together again (his sister and new brother-in-law being one example). But as far as he knew, none of them had been dumped like he had, left behind as the love of their life left town.

But still...

He knew he loved El; that he was *in* love with her. He'd known it since he was fourteen years old. He had never pictured himself with anyone else. During the last year, there had been two occasions when he'd had a chance with a girl, but he'd shut it down quickly.

As far as he was concerned, there was every other girl, and then there was El Hopper.

Could he get over the past? Could they move on from this? His mind was telling him *no* , but a small piece of his heart was saying *yes* .

He needed to talk to her. And he needed time.

Looking up from his plate, he cleared his throat as his family turned to him. "Dad?"

Ted Wheeler looked up, confused. "Yes, son?"

"Um...I need a favor."

When breakfast ended, Mike cleared the table while Nancy,

Jonathan, Karen, and Holly made plans for the afternoon. Ted left after breakfast, off to take care of Mike's favor.

Once the dishes were cleared, Mike made some calls, clarifying with Will about when and where the party would meet. When he had that finished, he made another call to El, letting her know the details.

The ladies and Jonathan had left by the time Mike heard the knock at the basement door. Letting out a breath, he opened it, letting El in.

"Hey."

"Hey," she said, stepping in. She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion as she looked around. "Where's everyone else?"

"They, uh..." he put his hands into his pockets. "They're not coming for another hour. I thought maybe we could talk."

"Oh," she said, nodding. She took a seat on the couch. Mike nervously sat at the game table.

"I wanted to talk about... *why* I said what I said yesterday."

"Mike," she said, causing him to look up. "I already know why."

"You do?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. Looking away, she continued, saying "I was....kind of a mouth breather, the way I ended things." She shrugged, then with a quick glance at him, quietly added "I don't blame you."

"It's not...it's not just that," he said. "I was...." he sighed, trying to think of the right words. Looking into her waiting eyes, he said, "I was broken, during this last year. It just...it hurt so bad. It took me....a *long* time to...be able to move on."

"I know," she said, nodding.

"But that's not the only reason I...said what I said yesterday." Looking at her again, he said, "I'm scared, El."

She looked confused. "Scared of what?"

"Of us. Of...if we got back together, I mean...what's to stop this from happening again? I don't honestly think I could survive it."

El sighed as she took in his words. Looking up, she said, "Can I say something?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"What I did, last year..." she shook her head. "Was the hardest thing...and the stupidest thing I ever did. I thought...I thought I was helping you. I didn't know how long my mom would've needed me and..."

"El, you know I would've waited."

"I know," she said, grinning. "That's...that's why you're so good, Mike. But I just...I looked at your life in Boston, and I...I was afraid I was keeping you from something." She shrugged. "From your life."

"But like I said then, El. You *were* my life."

"I know," she said again. "And you were my life, too." She smiled, as her eyes began to water. Wiping at them, she said "But I don't know, I think...I think I was afraid you'd come to resent me. Or that you'd blame me for not letting you do things you wanted in life. And...and I got scared. I thought it was the normal thing to do."

He chuckled. "Since when have we ever been normal?"

She smiled. "And I guess I was afraid of becoming the bad guy. So I panicked." She looked up, as a tear ran down her cheek. "And I made the biggest mistake of my life, because...I lost my best friend. I lost the first person who showed me what friendship is; the first person who truly loved me, and showed me what love is ." She sniffled, as their eyes met. "I knew it was a mistake as soon as I stepped out of the car. But I was too afraid to go back."

"Afraid of what?"

She sighed. "Afraid of you rejecting me. Afraid that you'd be so mad

that...you wouldn't even talk to me. Like....at Thanksgiving."

"Yeah, that wasn't a very good time, was it?"

She giggled. " *No* ." Shaking her head, she said "I hated not talking to you."

"I hated it, too," he admitted. "That's why I was so glad when I got back, that, you know...things were good between us. And part of me's afraid that if we go back to being *us* again, we could ruin it."

She looked at him. "I don't know if I can just be your friend, Mike."

He grinned. "I don't know if I can, either. When I saw that groomsman ask you to dance, I got...jealous."

She smiled. "You did?"

"Yeah," he admitted, blushing. "The thought of you and some guy...."

She shook her head. "I wasn't going to dance with him; he's not you."

He grinned. "He's not me, huh?"

She smiled. "Okay, *now* I take it back," she said jokingly.

They both laughed at that, as she wiped at her eyes again. Mike stood, going to get a box of tissues from the shelf. She took one and thanked him. After wiping her face, she stood and tossed it into the bathroom's trash. When she came out, he was waiting for her, standing by the couch.

As they met in the middle of the basement, she asked, "What made you want to talk to me?"

They stood close, less than three feet apart. Mike answered, saying "This morning, I saw Jonathan and Nancy together. And...they just looked so *happy* . And I thought about how I want that. And everytime I picture it...it's with you."

She sniffled, smiling up at him. "Me, too."

“Maybe I’m stupid, but...”

“You could never be stupid,” she said, shaking her head.

“But...” Just like the day before, he paused, thinking of what he was about to say. Did he want her back? Could they make this work? Was she worth the risk?

The answer was a resounding *yes* .

“I miss you, El. And...and I want to try again,” he finished.

His arms wrapped around her waist as he pulled her close, bringing his lips to hers. El’s arms wrapped around him as she smiled into the kiss.

A minute later they pulled away, both smiling as their foreheads touched.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too,” he whispered back.

He kissed her again, cupping her cheeks as he smiled, feeling how right this felt. He wasn’t thinking about their past; all he was thinking of was that he had this beautiful woman in his arms once more, that he loved her, and that she loved him. Nothing else mattered.

Finally pulling apart, she sighed, saying softly “But now you have to leave.”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“What do you...”

Upstairs the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of the rest of the party. Mike gave her a quick kiss, saying “I’ll be right back.”

When he brought the group downstairs, Max gave El a hug, before she and Lucas settled onto the couch. Will and Dustin sat at the game table, while Mike and El remained standing.

“So what’re we gonna do?” Dustin asked. “We can go to the movies, I haven’t seen Young Guns 2 yet.”

“I still haven’t seen Young Guns 1,” Lucas said.

“Guys...”

“What about Problem Child?” Dustin offered.

“Ugh, *no*,” Max said.

“Guys...”

“Okay then, Mad Max, what do you want to see?”

“Guys!”

The group turned to Will, who’d been trying to get their attention. Once all faces were on him, he nodded at their two standing friends.
“*Look* .”

The party looked, and eyes widened and mouths went agape as they saw that their two friends, Mike and El, were holding hands.

El blushed, hiding her head on Mike’s shoulder. Mike cleared his throat. “Um...”

“I *knew* it!” Dustin said, jumping up.

“You didn’t know anything,” Lucas said, standing up as well.

“Uh-huh! Last night when we left, I said...”

“Will you guys shut up?” Max said. Turning back to Mike and El, she asked, “So are you guys for real now, or...”

“Yeah, we’re for real,” Mike said, causing his friends to whoop with excitement.

“Too bad you’re leaving,” Will said, glancing at his watch. “When’s your flight?”

“That’s the thing. My dad, I asked him if he could change my flight.

So I don't go back until Saturday now."

"Really?" El whispered.

Mike nodded, kissing her forehead. "Really."

The party ended up not going out, instead choosing to stay in the basement like old times. Mike and El eventually took over the couch, sitting together as their friends talked about movies, what they'd do the next time everyone was in town, and future trips to see one another (which caused Max to spill the beans on she and Lucas's not-so-secret relationship).

On Wednesday everyone had breakfast together before Dustin caught his plane back to Michigan. Mike and El had dinner with Hopper, and Mike was happy to see the chief was glad they were back together.

Thursday the party spent time at The Palace, with Max getting her high score back in Dig Dug after almost four hours (and lots of quarters). After, Mike and El had dinner with Mike's family.

Friday morning the party saw Lucas off, with he and Max sharing a discreet kiss goodbye. Max and El then spent the day together, while Mike and Will hung out for a while. That night, El came over to the Wheeler's home as she and Mike discussed their future together, and ended up spending the night with him.

Saturday finally came, and the Wheeler table was full for breakfast once again, this time joined with Will, El, Nancy, and Jonathan.

After lengthy goodbyes, El dropped Mike off at the airport in the afternoon. There were whispered goodbyes and lingering kisses, but both knew they wouldn't be apart long.

As Mike said his last (for now) goodbye to El, he couldn't help but smile at the way things had turned out, and the possibilities before them. He didn't know what the future held for the two of them, but he knew they'd get through it. Together.

September, 1993

The sun was setting as Mike finally arrived home, happy that he'd gotten there before El did. It had now been almost three years since she had moved from Hawkins to Boston, and they both couldn't be happier. Mike was starting his final year at MIT, while El was beginning her third year at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. It was a Friday evening, and usually both of them had work. But Mike had been able to switch shifts with someone, and El had used one of her sick days to enjoy the night with Mike.

Weekends were usually spent with movies; either in the theater or at home. Last weekend Mike had rented Reservoir Dogs (he loved it, El-not so much), so today was her pick. She'd told him this morning she'd wanted to see Far and Away, giggling when he'd pretended to gag. So she was stopping by Blockbuster Video on her way home to pick up the VHS, giving Mike time to get what he needed.

Dropping off his backpack at the table, he went to their bedroom and opened his sock drawer. Reaching into the back, he suddenly had a fear that it wouldn't be there, but sighed in relief as his fingertips touched the velvety box he'd hidden back there months ago. He pulled it into the open, and opened it.

Staring back at him was the engagement ring he'd be proposing with tonight.

He could feel his heartbeat pick up, as he thought about how so much would be changing after tonight. Well, maybe not too much. He'd always known he'd be marrying El.

And Hopper had given his blessing without any hesitation, saying "I'm surprised it's taken you this long, kid."

Mike heard the front door open, and bolted upright.

"Mike?" he heard El call.

"Yeah, I'm here," he said back.

“I brought dinner. Can you help me?”

“Be right there,” he said, closing the drawer. Pocketing the box, he made his way to the kitchen.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for reading. Leave me a comment to let me know what you think.

As for what's next, I'm deciding between two stories to begin-a fluffy one or a not as fluffy one (thoughts? Preferences?)

Again, I hope you enjoyed this story, thank you for the comments/kudos, and hopefully I can churn out more stories. Thanks!